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cineACTION

THE ART HOUSE FILM
JEAN-LUC GODARD
FEDERICO FELLINI
 TSAI MING-LIANG



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Charisse, 1921–2008. *Silk Stockings*
(1957) co-star Fred Astaire.

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This issue looks at what is loosely termed art house films, past and present. Although art house film is difficult to define precisely, it is rooted in post-war culture and was a response to the rupture created by catastrophes such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima. In this respect, the art film was grappling with the moral and spiritual upheavals of the post-war period. Artists such as Rossellini, Antonioni, Bergman, the left bank group and the New Wave filmmakers in France, are examples of artists whose work came to epitomize the art film. Although there was no common ground of organized tenets that were adhered to or shared, there are some points of similarity. The European art film was a personal form that expressed the filmmaker's identity and perception of the world. Essentially it grew out of a radical rejection of the conventions of mainstream culture, reflecting the uncertainties of a world that had lost a clear moral grounding despite its technological and scientific advancements. The function of the art film was not diversion or entertainment, and many demanded a viewer willing to engage with a new kind of cinema. The challenge was met by an audience eager for a cinema that was more complicated in its ideas and aesthetics and committed to both the personal and immediate social world.

Art films were "films de cinéphiles", films of filmmakers who were actively rethinking the possibilities of the cinema and how it could be used intellectually and expressively. The experimentation with style and form was integrated into a dialogue with the viewer that pushed the boundaries of what was expected. If there is one director who could be recognized as being instrumental in initiating this movement it is Rossellini, and Rivette's comment about *Voyage in Italy* being the epitome of modern cinema remains prescient and still valid. *Voyage in Italy* weaves together the sense of alienation that came to characterize modern life, the struggle to make sense of mortality, of relationships that fail to perfectly satisfy one's needs, and the centrality of environment to a state of mind; all of these themes were central to the concerns of the art film. Perhaps unexpectedly, Hitchcock's late films are equally critical. *Vertigo* is an art film despite its assignment as entertainment. Films such as *Vertigo* and *Marnie* were at once minimalist, elemental and highly sophisticated in the way they



elicit both an emotional and intellectual response from the viewer.

Despite the fact that humanism has been denigrated in the last thirty years, it needs to be said that the success of the art film, in great part, can be attributed to its humanist sensibility; one of the reasons that Tsai Ming-liang pays tribute to Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* in *What Time Is It There?* is a recognition of the shared humanity that underpins both works and could be appreciated across different national cultures. Kiaraostami articulates a similar idea in his pedagogic discussion of the influence of Rossellini in his work in *Ten on Ten*.

Art house films survive in the present day but the cultural environment that sustained and nourished them has been greatly diminished. In part, the art house film has been relegated to the festival circuit, cinemathèque screenings, and to specialized presentations, suggesting that there needs to be a stronger aesthetic culture where critical practice functions more rigorously and is connected in a meaningful way to one's perceptions of the social world and human experience. The loss of a deeply felt relationship to a cinema that engages on so many levels has undermined the relevance of the art cinema. (See "The Decay of the Cinema" by Susan Sontag. Her 1996 essay which offered a strong polemic, raised many valid claims which remain relevant to the present day state of the cinema). And while some are released on DVD, these films ideally need to be seen in their proper format on big screens in an environment that will encourage a shared culture.

Still, thankfully the art house film exists, however tenuously. A recent example that received theatrical distribution, Wong Kar Wai's *My Blueberry Nights* is exemplary of some of the difficulties art films face. While the film may not be the director's finest achievement, it certainly deserves a more serious critical response than it was given in North America. *My Blueberry Nights* was treated dismissively and seemed to annoy critics because of its perceived transgressions: the film was shot in America, using the conventions of the road movie; it used a non-professional actor, Norah Jones for its lead; it audaciously blended a highly stylized aesthetic with elements of realism. In many ways, what is intriguing about the film is precisely its willingness to chal-

lenge expectations, blending generic conventions with a stylized aesthetic context that foregrounds colour, composition, and texture as do Wong Kar Wai's other films.

My Blueberry Nights is centred on the difficulty of sustaining close relationships and its costs to the individuals involved. In adapting to the expressivity of the culture, Wong's treatment of the principal characters is less muted or contained than in his Asian films. Critics objected particularly to Rachel Weisz and Natalie Portman's characters in part because they are close to being excessively drawn, playful and larger than life. The strengths of the film are in the complexities of the relationships presented and the emotional range that it covers. The use of a non-professional actor like Norah Jones and her lack of affect is nicely contrasted to the theatricality of the characters she meets on her travels. The film uses the structure of a fairy tale (*Alice in Wonderland*) as a means of exploring Jones's state of mind, as she moves from being a disoriented, lost and helpless spurned lover to a person who learns how to relate to the potential of relationships and the positive value in survival and change. *My Blueberry Nights* is, in essence, a road movie about a woman's journey and her identity. The film demands a different orientation, and has its own charm and eccentricity, and ultimately works if one is open to it. The film's eccentricities are weighted by a seriousness of tone. For example, the David Strathairn/ Rachel Weisz failed marriage is treated with sensitivity and nuance, the film being attuned to both characters, careful not to reduce them to quirky oddities. Similarly, Natalie Portman's character's struggle to come to terms with her father's death and her own identity is equally complex and touching.

We hope this issue speaks of our commitment to the art film and its immeasurable significance to film culture. We dedicate this issue to two great directors, Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni, whose work continues to inspire.

Florence Jacobowitz

Richard Lippe

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE 76

INTERNATIONAL CINEMA Recent developments in international cinema, new films from any nation or historical perspectives.

NEW CANADIAN FILMS Critical analysis or reviews of recent Canadian films.

UNDERRATED/OVERRATED FILMS Critical analysis of films that the writer considers past critics and scholars have over- or underrated.

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ISSUE 77

AVENGERS ON FILM Comic Book Heroes and Villains. This theme looks at the rapidly escalating popularity and presence of films based on comic book superheroes. Investigations of form and analyses of content are both welcome.

THE DOCUMENTARY As a counterpoint to the first theme, the issue will also look at the escalating popularity of what could be seen as its antithesis, the documentary film.

Edited by Susan Morrison.

It would be appreciated if a brief proposal be submitted as early as possible as an indication of intention to submit. Please address all queries and submissions to the issue's editor.

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Michelangelo Antonioni, 1912–2007. *Blow-Up* (1966) David Hemmings, as the photographer, in one of Antonioni's most enigmatic films.



Ingmar Bergman, 1918–2007. On the set of *Persona* (1966): Bergman with Liv Ullman and Bibi Andersson

The Bones of Reagan

or The Ruins of Art Cinema in Contemporary American Film

DARRELL VARGA

A Democratic victory would not change the world, but it would at least slow the momentum of the bombs-and-Jesus crowd. Those people have had their way long enough. Not even the Book of Revelation threatens a plague of vengeful yahoos. We all need a rest from this pogrom. Ronald Reagan is an old man. It will be the rest of us who will face Armageddon.

—Hunter S. Thompson (1986)¹

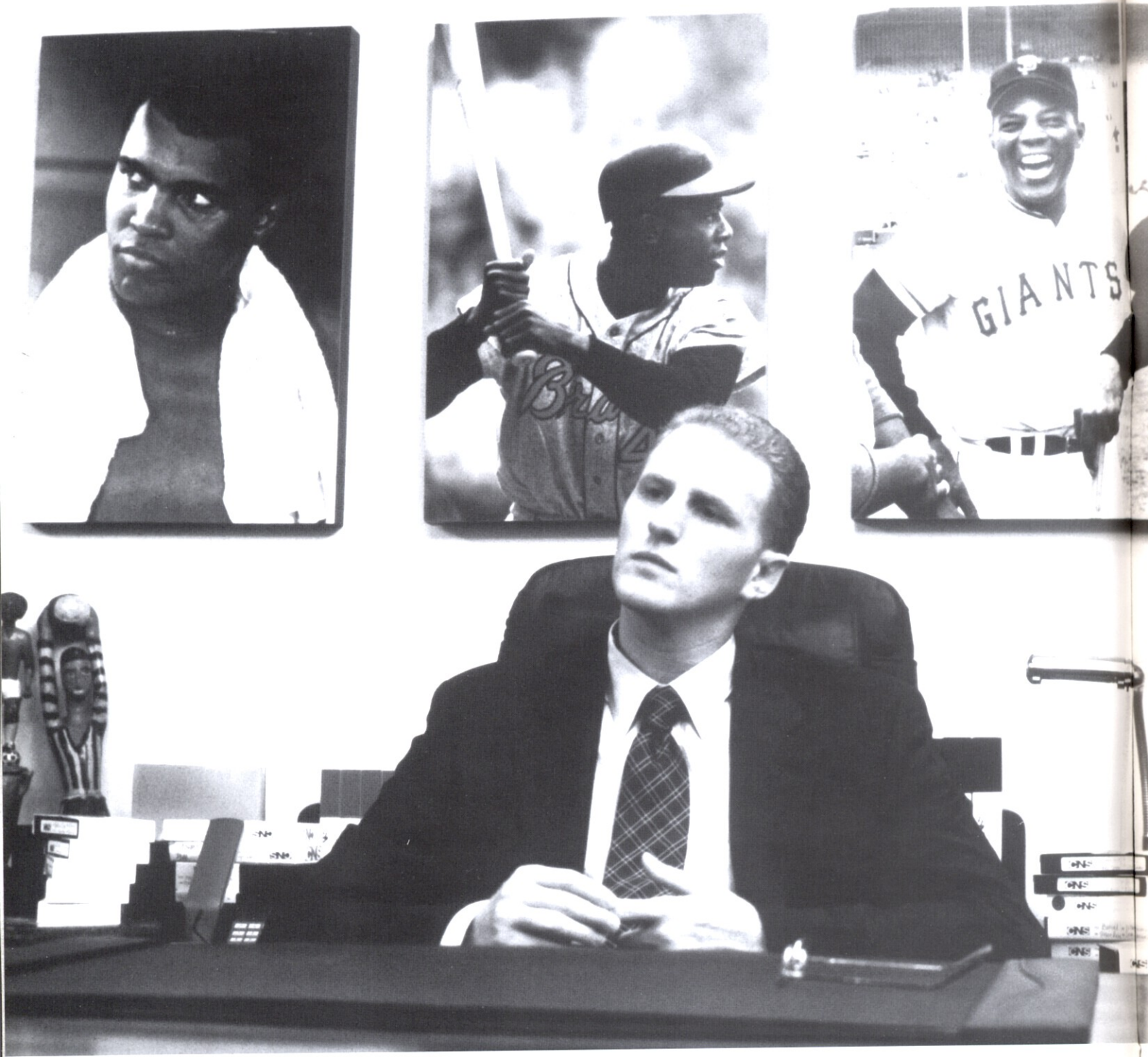
A range of contemporary American films including *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), *American Psycho* (Mary Heron, 2000), *American Splendor* (Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003) and even the Reagan-era documentary *American Dream* (Barbara Kopple, 1989) reflect something of the shift in filmmaking practice that is symptomatic of late capitalism, from the counter-culture ethos of 1970s New Hollywood through to the era of the blockbuster and corresponding intensification of neo-conservative hegemony. The films I choose to discuss, acknowledging that the selection is idiosyncratic rather than historically comprehensive, emerge in an era where the direct influence of European art cinema movements has passed, and after the triumphalist ascendancy of Reagan-era backlash against progressive social initiatives on such issues as race and gender equality and worker rights. While the disaster of the American economy and the crime of the war in Iraq suggests the failure of the imperial project *The Project for a New American Century*,² the

massive increase in the concentration of wealth and power in contemporary America suggests otherwise, as Naomi Klein's trenchant and carefully researched study of free-market disaster capitalism demonstrates.³ These "American" titles, as well as important related films such as *To Die For* (Gus Van Sant, 1995), *High Fidelity* (Stephen Frears, 2000), *The King of Comedy* (Martin Scorsese 1983), *Bamboozled* (Spike Lee, 2000), *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989), and *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (Stephen Soderbergh, 1989), to name a few, are particularly interesting for the expression of the shifts in hegemonic tendencies as a function of the consolidation of dominant culture around a pervasive neo-conservative mass media.

Cultural Ruins

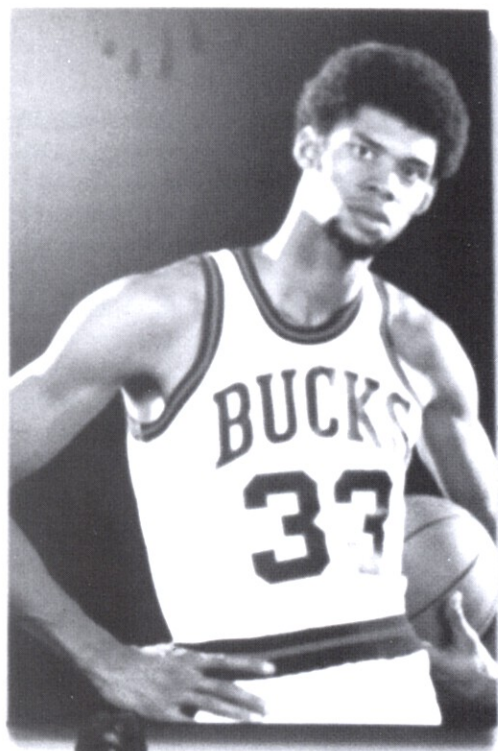
This list of exceptional films from the era demonstrates Stephen Prince's point, against the dominant critical rhetoric, that the art of cinema has not been entirely washed away by the tidal wave of the blockbuster. As he says: "Bad films (however one conceives them—as blockbusters, special effects showcases, teen comedies) did not drive out good films. Special effects extravaganzas did not vitiate good writing. While there is much irrationality, crassness, and timidity in the business, the market did what it does best—it insured that a wide range of films were available for the nation's movie-goers."⁴ This populist defense of the laissez-faire market serves the good purpose of testing rhetorical claims against the actual practices of filmmakers and audiences; however, the claim





of free market choice elides the broader ideological influence of the schema of the blockbuster in the narrative flow even in independent cinema. What Prince describes in his excellent history of 1980s American cinema is a systemic contradiction between the economic and control-based backlash against the excesses of auteurism, culminating in the fallout from *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980) at the start of the decade along with the spectacular rise of the home video market which created a huge demand and corresponding opportunities for independent producers and distributors.⁵ In fact, this shortage of Hollywood product mirrors similar marketplace conditions that provided opportunities for the

distribution of European art cinema in North America in the 1960s, in turn stimulating the rise of American indie filmmaking and the popular acceptability of the idea of film as art form, not to mention contributing to the legitimization of Film Studies. Yet these similarities and the persistence of intelligent filmmaking, if always under siege, obscures the important transformation from the heyday of art cinema to the indie era—a shift reflected in economic conditions of production, the increasingly global and digital domain of marketing, and in the ideological thrust of narrative. What we have today are no longer to be called art films, but films which trade on the currency of the idea of art and are sympto-



their films from a perspective of inter-relatedness. In brief, when Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* won the Golden Palm award at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival, Spike Lee made public his outrage that his film was shut out by the white jury's (as lead by art film icon Wim Wenders) preference for a masturbation fantasy movie about white narcissism (John Pierson details this history and Spike Lee's response in his book *Spike, Mike, Slackers, and Dykes*).⁶ In retrospect, Lee's film is clearly more interesting for its innovative engagement of form and content in the expression of racism and rage in America. In Lee's film, character and identity are explicitly produced through the nexus of economic conditions and material reality. The class divide, and corresponding backlash has, arguably, intensified since the film's release, with the further decline of inner cities, attacks on affirmative action policies, not to mention the intensified recruitment of black Americans into the military. But what the jury no doubt found important in the Soderbergh film is the pervasive presence of technologies of mass communication, namely video, in the expression of straight-boy desire. More to the point, in this film the mediated image of desire is internalized, providing the main character with a sexual outlet while his physical body is impotent.

Soderbergh's film fits well with Susan Hayward's useful definition of art cinema as "intentionally distanc[ing] spectators to create a reflective space for them to assume their own critical space or subjectivity."⁷ Hayward goes on to remind us that since the 1920s, art cinema has been associated with eroticism. It is the representation of sexuality that probably did more to make art film distribution profitable, and facilitate the subsequent indie boom of the 1980-90s, than all the great thematic existential explorations of meaning. In this way, Soderbergh's film expresses something of the nostalgia for the New Wave era, perhaps unconsciously guiding the Cannes jury, insofar as it positions desire in the image along the lines of how, for New Wave filmmakers, as much as they privileged the gritty materiality of the streets, life is cinema and cinema, resolutely, is life.

Bamboozled

Spike Lee's films are, however, populated by characters asserting a claim to the fullness of life in the world. As much as the character Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) may seem, for some white audience members, threatening in *Do the Right Thing* his presence is an assertion of the right to public space and, while he is largely silent, he speaks through the dynamic energy of amplified rap coming from his boom box. His murder at the hands of the police at once expresses the sad truth of a culture of segregation, state-sanctioned violence, and lynching. The live on-air execution of Manray/Mantan (Savion Glover) a decade later in Lee's *Bamboozled* can be read as a continuity of expressed outrage at the systemic racism and violence in American society that can be traced back in Lee's oeuvre to the murder of Radio Raheem.

In the later film, the character is executed by the Mau Maus, a group of black activists outraged by Manray's star performance in the gross-stereotype (and overwhelmingly popular) TV show: 'Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show,' based on a litany of references from the embarrassingly racist history of

matic of the marginalized concept of artists in contemporary popular culture.

Sex, Lies and Videotape* and *Do the Right Thing

To put the American films in context, let us first consider *Sex, Lies and Videotape* along with *Do the Right Thing*, two films which represent competing tendencies in independent production between narratives evoking material reality versus the more common tendency to examine the inner life and subjectivity of individual characters. The antagonistic positions of the two filmmakers at the time of release has interfered with an analysis of

American film and television. The end credits of the film provide a montage of archive footage of blackface representation, serving as a documentary point of reference for the fictional narrative. Manray's execution at the hands of militants outraged over the history of disenfranchisement and the participation of black Americans in the reproduction of racial stereotypes (the show is played in blackface and set in a watermelon patch) sadly becomes self-destructive rather than transformative. That too becomes a media commodity as the murder is staged on-line but also picked up for television broadcast. The film posits the central role of film and television in the production of hateful stereotypes and the setting of limits over black expression and social transformation—the literal limit being the murder of the black body. The media is not internalized in the expression of desire and identity, as in Soderbergh's film, but instead becomes the social field for cultural articulation at the expense of action in the public sphere.

Sex, Lies, and Videotape, on the other hand, follows the dominant tendency, identified by Robert Ray, of American *art* cinema as drawing upon formal innovations to express a superficial radicality while, by and large, reconciling to ideological conservatism of classical narrative and dominant culture. Ray describes how Hollywood has borrowed from New Wave innovations,⁸ but that these tend to function as inserts within conventional narrative, in turn reflecting ambiguous impulses in a culture that is, after all, founded by a particularly violent puritanism: "Like the counterculture with its western imagery, Hollywood mobilized renovated versions of its traditional genres and heroes to satisfy the audience's schizophrenic impulses toward irony and nostalgia."⁹ In contrast, Spike Lee is the quintessential independent filmmaker insofar as he refuses, in spite of his celebrity profile and studio relationships (*Bamboozled* was produced by New Line) to accede to the reconciliatory practices of dominant hegemony which typically seeks to negate opposition under the guise of liberal individualism—what from a Frankfurt School perspective is systematic mass deception.

Bamboozled directly confronts this production apparatus by depicting how even racism can be produced as a saleable commodity. The main character Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) is a television writer frustrated by the under representation of blacks on screen, save for stereotype roles. In response, he writes the scenario for a minstrel show which goes on to become a huge success, generating a new popular affection for blackface and demonstrating that an audience is produced for a black television show so long as the black body is an object of derision—race hatred is after all just another product, as the film makes clear with analogies to hula-hoops and pet rocks. While Delacroix begins this project with the intention of exposing the limits of media representation through satire, he too ends up in blackface as he becomes consumed by a system of representation over which black Americans exercise little effective control. His opportunistic white boss Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport) states the power relationship clearly: "I probably know niggers better than you. And don't go getting offended by my use of the quote unquote N word. ...I don't give a goddam what that prick Spike Lee says. Tarantino was right. Nigger is just a word." When

Manray/Mantan finally rejects the stereotype role in which he has been cast, ironically right before he is kidnapped by the Mau Maus, Dunwitty lets go of the veneer of liberal tolerance and the playful pretense of irony, telling Manray: "Niggers like you are a dime a dozen...Get him out of the building. Ungrateful mother-fucker." He voices the same self-satisfied racist rage as Sal, the pizza parlor owner in *Do the Right Thing* whose actions lead to the murder of Radio Raheem. Racism functions in collusion with capitalist relations of power to exercise control over the black body and punish all challenges to white control over the terms of production.

The context of capitalist relations of production is signified in the film's opening, set in Delacroix's expensive apartment, inside an ornate clock tower, with the gaze outside framed through the clock face set over top of the window. The arms of the clock loom large in the background as Delacroix provides, in direct address to the camera, a definition of irony, doubly made ironic by the speaker's implication in the temporal regimentation of the body. The image, in a film so clearly informed by film history, suggests reference to Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), the great satire of the encroachment of capitalism upon the very rhythms of the worker body. Delacroix, author of the minstrel satire, is himself fully caught up in this regime of time-production. His real name is Peerless Dothan, but he assumes a more pretentious name and demeanor to signal class ascendancy and a degree of power which is granted only at the expense of a larger exercise of solidarity, and with the ever-present fear of displacement. In a later scene, Manray and his partner Womack are seen fleeing from a squat raided by the police announcing the attack by order of Mayor Giuliani. Given the expressed link between the social context of race and class inequity and the ideological project of television, it is not surprising that Delacroix's television show makes great use of tap dancing, that particularly unique form of American dance itself referential of a Fordist regime of production. In a discussion of this film in the context of the uses of tap in film history, Jodi Brooks draws upon Kracauer's observation that certain forms of mass culture make capitalist modes of production explicitly visible:

For Kracauer, the rhythm that the tapping chorus line beats out is the exemplary sound of American modernity, and racing fingers [on a typewriter] and racing feet tapped out a similar beat, from office to matinee movie to supper club. ...In this respect, tapping and typing exemplify a form of temporal experience seen as central to twentieth-century modernity—the peculiar erotics of the clock in Taylorist-Fordist culture—and as such can be considered one of its key time signatures (and a distinctly aural time signature).¹⁰

This form of performance is contained within the slick veneer of television, and these sequences are filmed in super 16mm format while the rest of the movie is shot on digital video. While budget constraints make the use of video an appealing format, it likewise signifies the pervasiveness of mass media as well as the sense of gritty urgency associated with documentary. Once the

show is broadcast, we see a brief scene of protest outside the television studio starring Rev. Al Sharpton and Johnny Cochran, drawing attention to the urgency of social protest while also proving Lee's point of the degree to which opposition is co-opted in the production of capital and celebrity (in this case functioning to mark the TV show as radical while allowing for the persistence of a meta-narrative of conservatism).

The King of Comedy

The dark satire of mass media in Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* expresses a desperation to belong, that is, to become a TV personality, leading the main character, Rupert Pupkin (Robert DeNiro) to kidnap Jerry Lewis, who plays a Johnny Carson-like late night TV talk show host, in order to secure himself a slot on the air. When we see Rupert rehearsing his lines, it is difficult not to recall the menacing fascism of this actor's role as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976), John Hinckley's hero. As one reviewer commented in defending this often derided Scorsese film, "*King* is Scorsese's answer to the politicians and cultural critics who blamed *Taxi Driver* for 'causing' the Reagan assassination attempt."¹¹ The film's brilliance is in the dark moment of Rupert's appearance on the talk show, where his monologue is banal enough to perfectly replicate the mindless chatter of TV. He becomes an insider while remaining forever on the outside in a strange way analogous to the appeal Reaganite neo-conservative economic policies sold under the guise of populism. Reagan enacted social and economic policies explicitly against the best interests of working-class Americans, yet managed to maintain a populist public iconography, especially evident in the gushing tributes published in mainstream media at the time of his death in 2004 (these tributes generally omitted mention of Iran-contra, funding of the Taliban while neglecting Aids funding, support for Apartheid, etc.). It is perhaps indicative of the cynicism of the era that this image can persist in the face of its own campiness, as Ray points out:

For whatever else Reagan may represent to his supporters (a return to traditional values, a refusal of modernity), he remains, even for them, vaguely a figure of camp, a poor man's cowboy most often associated with movies in which he shared billing with a chimpanzee. Reagan's ambivalent image only offers another sign of American culture's growing mythological self-consciousness. Indeed, perhaps only a former movie star could satisfy an age that is at once so nostalgic for and so cynical about, clear-cut action and straightforward heroes.¹²

Ray goes on to note how television provides a sincere version of nostalgia while the movies do so with ironic inflection. These modes of nostalgia are especially evident in movies where TV is explicitly invoked, as in *King of Comedy*, which has its irony and eats it too. What is the Jerry Lewis character if not Reagan in another guise—warm and likeable on screen, but mean-spirited and humorless the rest of the time (recall such great policy statements as: homelessness is a personal choice, trees cause pollu-

tion and ketchup is a vegetable). Indie cinema in post-Reagan America is distinct from the earlier generation of art cinema in part due to the social and economic changes characteristic of the Reagan era. That earlier era of art cinema is linked with the counter-culture movement in spirit if not necessarily in form, but the neo-conservative counter-revolution also begins with Reagan who, as California governor, literally called for a "blood-bath" in response to student radicalism at Berkeley.¹³

Cultural Currency and Reagan's Bones

During the media spectacle of the 2004 and current 2008 U.S. presidential elections, Republicans battled over the bones of Reagan in asserting the cultural currency of the neo-con patriarch. At the same time, fundamentalist retrenchment brought a rejection of stem-cell research which would contribute to understanding of Alzheimer's Disease, the degenerative brain disorder he suffered from in his later years (before that, his memory loss was more a product of political convenience, as in the case of the Iran-Contra swindle). Reagan's presidency brought into public consciousness the integral relation between the entertainment industry and the political sphere, while facilitating a twin ideological consciousness of resignation over the possibility of substantial social change along with an entrenched cynicism about politics and social life. Movies made in this context symptomize this ethos, substituting style and irony for engagement. At the same time, there does remain traces of resistance to dominant hegemony in the contemporary independent film.

When I refer to contemporary cinema I am talking about the last 30 or so years, the rise of the contemporary blockbuster with such films as *Jaws* (1975) and the first retail outlet of the *Star Wars* (1977) franchise. A key transition film is an auteurist favorite, Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* (1972) which, as Biskind points out, initiates blockbuster distribution practices of mass releasing while also foreshadowing Reagan-era conservatism.¹⁴ The ethos of neo-conservative retrenchment is consolidated in narrative terms by the time of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), Reagan's election in 1980, and in industry practice through the increased emphasis on marketing via a global media marketplace across multiple platforms such as merchandising and theme parks. Where art cinema is typically understood by the critical convention of singularity in authorship, the blockbuster is experienced as a key event in the tidal wave marketing of cultural products. The point of marketing is to encourage viewers to consume the latest blockbuster, not a specific cultural narrative, and if not this blockbuster then another from the showroom floor. Fred Wasser explains this economic model, "Culture industries operate by creating a surplus of products in order to increase the probability that one of the products will become a breakout hit that will boost corporate profits."¹⁵ The challenge for contemporary filmmakers is to make a claim for singularity within this broader cultural field.

Likewise, the shift away from art cinema as it developed in America under the intoxicating influence of the European New Wave is a shift away from a more realist inflected emphasis on the rhythms of the everyday, and a shift back to a narrative trajectory privileging clearly defined heroes and villains in a form

generally referred to as "Indie" film. This is not to say that progressive political films are no longer made in the 1980s, *Matewan* (John Sayles, 1987) is a great example, but the general tendency is toward irony and detachment—a trend consistent with industry preferences and marketing exigencies that began in the 1970s. Again, as Ray points out: "By covertly minimizing the distinctions between the Left and Right films, Hollywood encouraged its audience to attend both cycles."¹⁶ In this way, New Wave innovations become conflated into a continuation of classical style precisely because they function primarily on the level of style. I would argue that this is clearly the case in contemporary indie film, especially in the work of Quentin Tarantino. Where then do we find the rhythms of the everyday, rhythms which likewise invoke something of the specter of art cinema; that is, the urgency of cinema as a public art which today lies in ruins along with so many public entities.

We need to understand how the real is articulated in cultural images, but to do so we have to dig through these many layers of representation. One way of understanding the postmodern condition is as the cultural and aesthetic form of globalization—the destabilization of authorship and modernist concepts of meaning and value as parallel to the displacement of locations of production from that of consumption. This shift needs to be understood in economic as well as in cultural terms. In the case of the movies, the rise of the director as artist in 1970s American cinema has been undermined in the 1980s by the rise of the independent distributor, niche marketing, and the development of home video. Wasser describes the hierarchy of control in these terms: "The earnings that the distributor can put together determine the overall allocation of production resources. It is only as secondary players that the writers, directors, set designers, et. al. can make their operation decisions in terms of actual filmmaking."¹⁷ Rather than produce radical cinema, indie film fills the void in Hollywood production by creating an anti-establishment aura while remaining politically ambiguous.

Michael Rogin, in his book *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*, describes how this B-movie actor (and McCarthy-era proponent of the blacklist) who became president was scheduled to speak to the Academy at the 1981 Oscars. The video playback of his speech about how the movies inspire America was delayed by a day due to the inconvenience of his being shot by John Hinckley, in an assassination attempt inspired by *Taxi Driver*. As Rogin describes it: "The television audience watching a screen saw a Hollywood audience watch another screen. One audience saw another applaud a taped image of a healthy Reagan, while the literal president lay in a hospital bed. Reagan was president because of film, hospitalized because of film, and present as an undamaged image because of film."¹⁸ Cultural texts such as the movies likewise provide a legitimacy of dominant ideology and in the case cited by Rogin appear to demonstrate the consolidation of politics and media culture, but these texts can also articulate moments of rupture. While the structural limits to feature filmmaking can be understood as regulating political dissent, that by no means is to say that films are not political. Indeed, as Steven Prince effectively argues, Reagan-era films are explicitly political, and that this is consistent with both the extremism of

policy and efforts of image-management. As he indicates: "With the Reagan political agenda at the center of public discussion and debate, and with the administration's own need to promote and consolidate that agenda, ideological production and dispute were especially acute during the period."¹⁹ He goes on to make the important point that Reaganite media interventions are not simply about the maintenance of image, but about intervening to control resources and markets, and in these interventions real people suffer.

American Dream

Hardt and Negri describe the transformation of empire into a global economic frontier in relation to the legacy of open space, metaphor for expansionist U.S. culture.²⁰ This metaphor brings to mind *American Dream*, the academy award winning

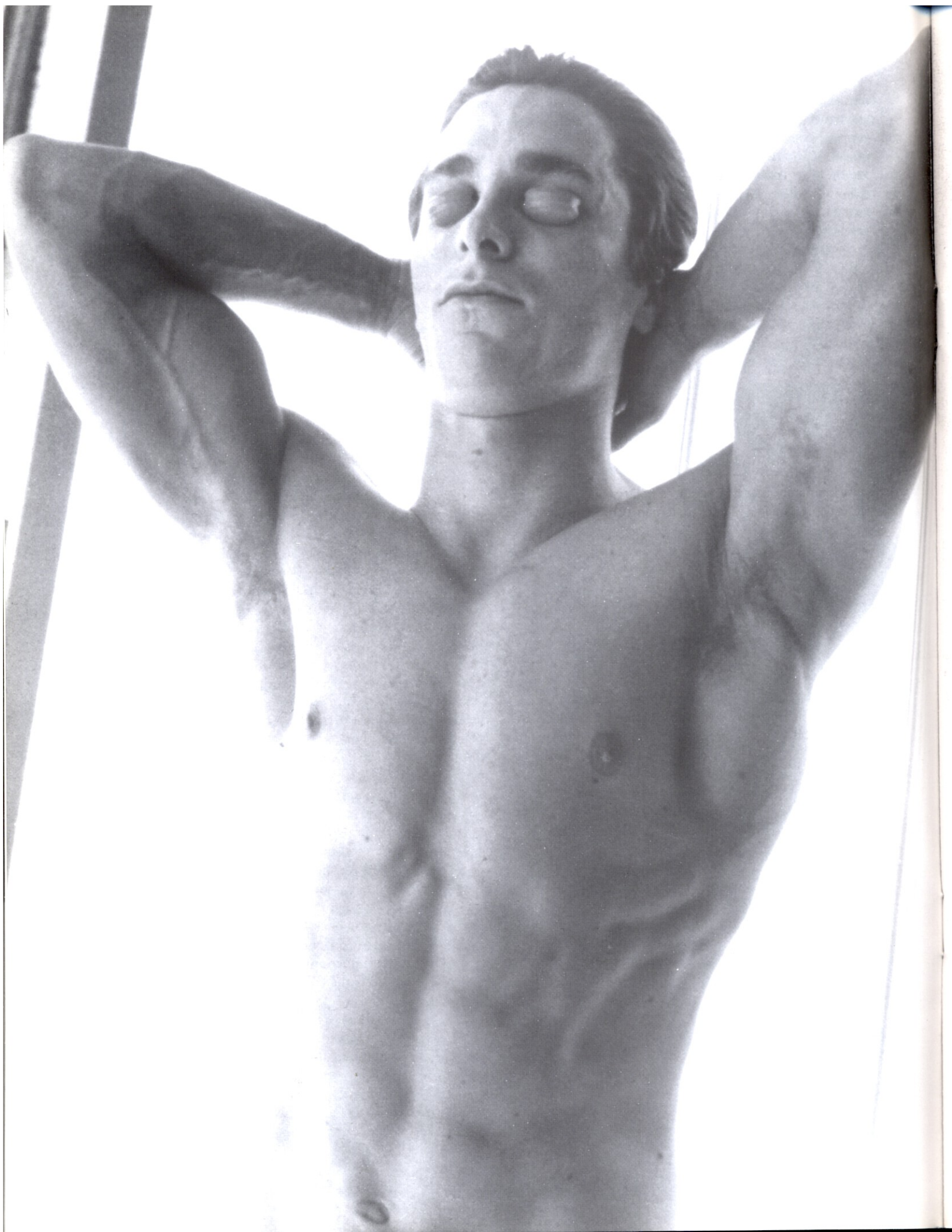


documentary directed by Barbara Kopple, about the labour struggles in the meat-packing industry at the ascendancy of the Reagan era. Kopple's film is important for the post-Fordist discord between prevailing cultural assumptions of the uses of space and global shifts in labour, and the dislocation between sites of production and of consumption. The film forcefully reveals the decline of the post-war compromise of labour peace in return for a modicum of middle-class affluence on the part of workers, along with the entrenchment of food processing as a central industry in the wide-open spaces of the mid-west. A key aspect of the reorganization of production under globalization is the dislocation of production from processing and consumption. If Kopple's documentary is a tragedy in dramatic terms, it is because we witness the worker's painful realization that their collective work and contribution to commu-

nity no longer has commodity-exchange value.

The documentary concentrates on the lived experiences of workers caught up in the global shifts of production over which they have little control. Members of the community are turned against each other in acts of desperation to earn a bare living. Of course, the underlying irony is that they are slaughterhouse workers themselves brought to economic and emotional slaughter, and the film opens with explicit images of assembly-line butchery. This is the iconic image of the everyday posited in this film, the brutal efficiency of assembly-line meat processing and its relation to the privileged emotional moments through which striking workers express hardship and the breakdown of community. *American Dream* is a key film for examining the dawn of the Reagan era and the film begins with explicit reference to the discourse of Reaganomics and the anti-union backlash that





dominates the era. Immediately following the slaughter-house image, we see a montage of television news clips detailing setbacks for organized labour, including the direct assault on the collective bargaining rights of air-traffic controllers, one of Reagan's first major actions when coming into office. De-regulation follows the de-regulation of capital across borders. The film deals with the struggle to express solidarity in the face of a reconstitution of labour-management relations, but it does not really examine the logic of power which gives rise to a remapping of spatial divisions of labour. The filmmaker-observer is positioned, like the meat-packers, as outside the discourse, seeking to hold onto fragments of meaning in a context where the spatial relations giving shape to meaning have been altered.

American Psycho

In the mean-spirited 1980s popular narrative texts shift from lament to the glorification of power and wealth. Based on the controversial novel by Brett Easton Ellis—controversial because of the intellectually sloppy assumption that the representation of violence is equivalent to advocacy, *American Psycho*, released in 2000 but explicitly set in the 1980s, satirizes the persistent contempt for humanity that characterizes politics during this period. The main character, Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) is a Wall Street stockbroker, someone at the centre of the shifts in capital that define the era. Indeed he is the image of pure fascism—physically beautiful and fit, with an encyclopedic knowledge of consumer goods and in complete control of his fully corporatized environment—and he is ruthlessly violent. Patrick is defined entirely as image and his speech alternates between well-rehearsed and convincing articulations of progressive social positions along with a nauseating litany of references to 1980s pop music. The film is a wry counterpoint to the period's increased production of films with a strong music tie-in, catering to the youth market.²¹ *American Psycho* both reflects this market condition but also provides critical intervention in the association of the routinized rhythms of mundane pop with violence. In his spare time Patrick is a serial killer and his victims are those targeted by neo-conservative policies from Reagan to Bush Jr.: the poor and homeless, homosexuals and women, all to a background soundtrack of Phil Collins and Huey Lewis and the News, among other icons of pop shallowness. This background soundtrack is the structuring force of the everyday.

American Psycho takes aim at the crass materialism and systemic inequality which produces monsters, and is an intensification of its Hitchcock namesake. While the earlier film, *Psycho* (1960), can be understood as positing psychosis as formed in the individual in relation to society, the latter situates society itself as monstrous, or points to the monster as inevitable outcome. It is a monster that continually consumes itself, as in Gus Van Sant's *To Die For*. In Van Sant's film, the main character Suzanne (Nicole Kidman) constructs a video monologue demo-tape as audition material for a job as an on-air TV personality. Her experience of living in the everyday requires the construction of a personality because the presence of self cannot be taken for granted outside of the system of reproduction. The tape is also a rationale for the murder of her husband who stood

in the way of her career. She describes him as a nice guy but someone who just does not know anything about TV. As in *American Beauty*, and like the neo-conservative ethos, the career woman is cast as beautiful but cold, vapid, and threatening.

Henry Giroux and Imre Szeman locate *To Die For*, *American Beauty* and *American Psycho* along with *Fight Club* and a range of other contemporary films as offering the appearance of critique without substantial challenge to the prevailing social and economic structure.

Rather than turning a critical light on important social issues, such films often trivialize them within a stylized aesthetics that revels in irony, cynicism, and excessive violence. ...It is never imagined that a whole culture could or should change how it organizes the lives of members. These films attempt to reinforce the individualism of neoliberal capitalism by allowing each of us to identify ourselves with their exceptional protagonists, those true individuals who are able to separate themselves out of the mass fantasy of contemporary consumerism and who can thus live out a genuine life in spite of the anxieties and dissatisfactions of the present moment.²²

In narrative terms, *To Die For*, *American Beauty*, and *American Psycho* make interesting use of an interior monologue—a technique explicitly at odds with the codes of commercial cinema, which prefers that filmmakers show rather than tell. Likewise, in a global media marketplace action is privileged insofar as it does not have to be subtitled. However, the interiority of these films is consistent with Giroux and Szeman's critique insofar as it provides a retreat from the world outside. This inward gaze is also consistent with neo-conservative response strategy to the progressive gains of the 1960s and 70s, a strategy aimed at diminishing the public sphere. As Daniel Marcus describes the policy outlined by the Trilateral Commission's influential book *The Crisis of Democracy* (1975), where the crisis for the elites is a problem of too much democracy:

The book argued that contemporary democracies were overloaded by new demands from citizens, and it called for a reduction in democratic activism by the new social movements in order to preserve business profit margins and military strength. The conservative attempts to roll back the Sixties sought to reprivatize social concerns, to once more identify the family and privatized production and consumption as the proper sphere of individuals' attention.²³

Marcus goes on to describe how the counter-culture era came to be characterized by neo-conservatives as violent and unruly rather than being guided by a, however flawed, utopian impulse. This characterization serves as a veil to the real bloodshed of contemporary policy while privileging cultural narratives of introspection rather than engagement.

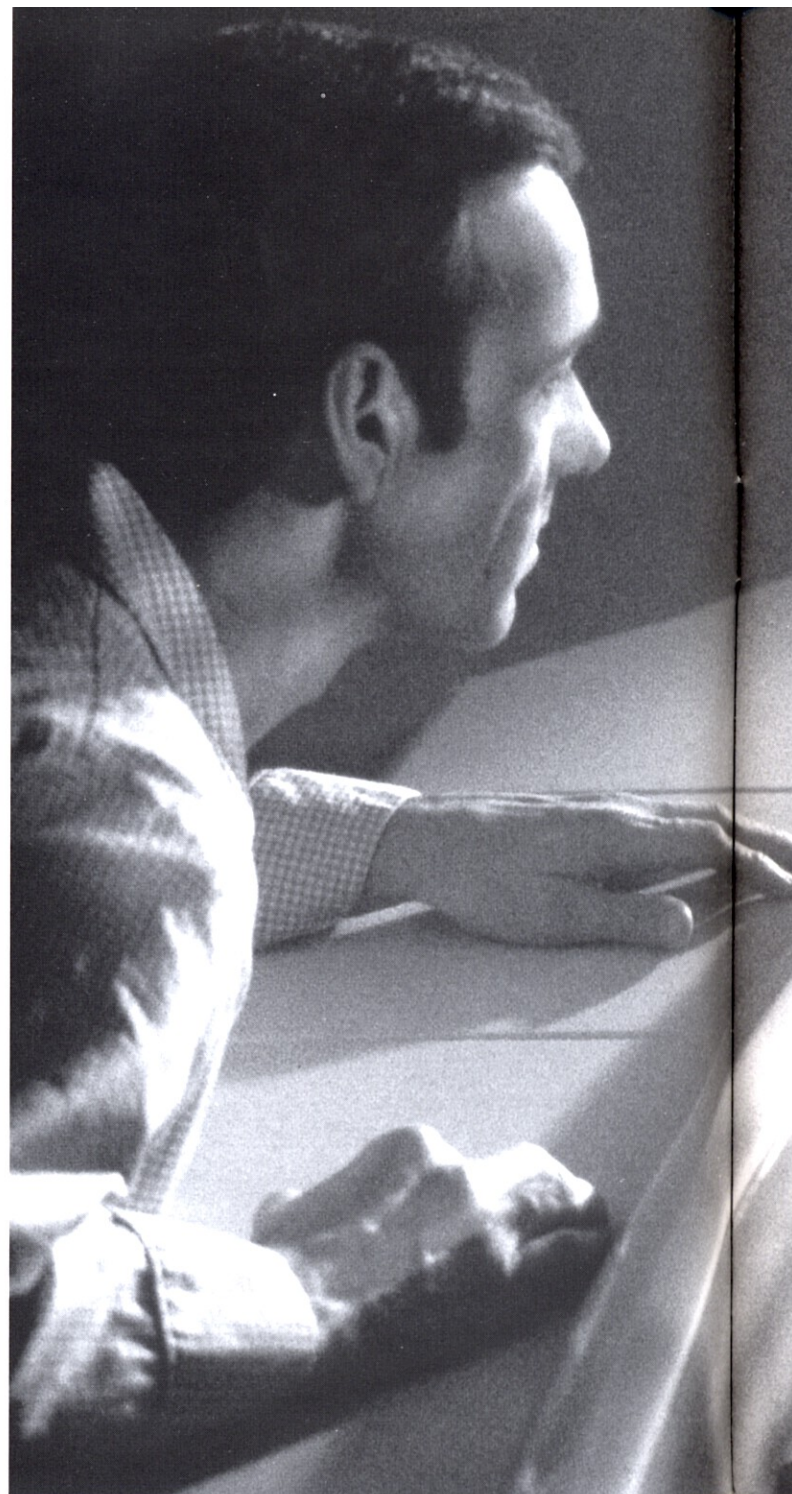
Patrick Bateman self-consciously narrates his own affectless

persona, where greed and disgust are identified as his only emotions. He can get away with murder, literally, because he is dressed for success—his body and clothing are armor, a beautiful machine covering-over his contempt. In turn, his interior monologue is not an exploration of meaning; rather, it is about the value of the surface image. In his self-introduction, he says: "There is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction. But there is no real me. Only an entity, something illusory." Similarly, in *High Fidelity* the main character Rob Gordon (John Cusack) explicitly situates identity as formed through consumerism: "It's not what you're like. It's what you like." Near the end of *American Psycho*, Patrick begins to break down and confesses over the phone to his lawyer, but the lawyer not only assumes the call is a prank but mistakes Patrick for someone else. He says at the end: "This confession has meant nothing." Patrick can continue killing, because his identity has entirely dissolved into the media air, while his actions, like the history of the Reagan era, remain written in blood.

American Beauty

American Beauty provides us with the glib surfaces of suburban America as structured by routinized consumption disconnected from real human needs. It fits well within the characteristics of middle-class angst in what Jeffrey Sconce calls the American "smart film." Rather than focus on the familiar trope of alienation, Sconce suggests that this and similar films be considered more broadly as symptomatic of an ethos which is less characterized by apathy than by a rejection of the prevailing culture. As he says, "More interesting than this explicit agenda of dissecting the white middle class as a crucible of emotional dysfunction, many of these films also engage, either explicitly or at the margins, in a more subtle critique of the politics of identity within consumer culture."²⁴ My concern here is whether irony and disaffection is a political dead-end that functions to legitimize contemporary social conditions and the privation of experience. While the soundtrack of *American Psycho* is 1980s apolitical pop, in *American Beauty* it is the aggressive white hetero guitar-oriented rock of the 1970s. This is the beat to which the main character Lester (Kevin Spacey) engages with his idea of social protest.

If American film of the 1970s can be generally characterized as more socially mature, what one sees on screen in the era of the blockbuster is an increasingly infantilized narrative. The reverse coming-of-age plot of *American Beauty*, where the main character transforms from adult to teenager, is indicative of this shift. The tone of the film as established in the opening sequence recalls *Badlands* (1973), Terrence Malick's iconic American art film. But where Malick's film situates teen angst in relation to the corruption of adulthood, in the latter film it is the adult who chooses teen nihilism over more productive social engagement. There is no examination of social structure except in familiar Willy Loman-esque references to the banality of work. In turn, Lester morphs into a teenager after leaving his white-collar career and gets a job flipping hamburgers, while spending his free time pumping iron, stroking his muscle-car, and smoking dope. If there is a critical moment in this film, it is in the rejection of the glib surfaces of middle-class affluence, the man-



icured lawns and expensive furniture which demonstrate status but provide no source of real pleasure except as dead icons of the market. But the critical moment is left dormant in exchange for narcissistic individualism and Lester is not moving downtown; he simply wants to put his feet up on the furniture while expecting wife/mommy to pay the bills. In this narrative trajectory we see the persistence of the 1980s in the present era. Like many contemporary movies, film history serves as a vast storehouse from which to borrow significations of meaning. The narrative begins with an echo of *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) through the use of a voice-over narration from a character that is already dead. Wilder's film is about the decline of the



aura of the studio era—glamour and social importance—while *American Beauty* is a glib narrative privileging fate over social intervention—what change can we hope for when the main character Lester is, after all, already dead?

Society is monstrous and a literal monster lives next door to Lester in the form of a hyper-authoritarian marine colonial father-figure who eventually pulls the trigger on his neighbor after suspecting that he is seducing his teenage son Ricky. The monster is a closet homosexual whose repression explodes in violence, but he is a cartoon character, a metaphoric rather than metonymic manifestation of dominant culture. He is the flipside to Lester's predictable desire for the beautiful friend of his

teenage daughter. Stereotypes of gender and sexuality are one of the ways the film signals its unwillingness to examine the ideological assumptions running through American society. In an insightful article detailing the film's incest motif as co-extensive with its feminist backlash, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn suggests that the incest theme "ideologically inverts the social realities of white male privilege. This structure redirects sympathy toward beleaguered midlife heroes by portraying them as victims of unhinged and vengeful wives, seductive and manipulative daughters, or both."²⁵ Similarly, the boy next door, Ricky, is glorified as an outsider who rejects the hypocritical surfaces of dominant culture. But it is no longer the counter-culture era, he



is not simply going to turn-on and drop-out; instead, he earns a tremendous amount of money dealing very high grade dope and surrounds himself with high-tech electronics, the narcotic of media culture. He is nominally an artist, framing ephemeral moments of beauty with his video camera. While these images of the everyday are gestures toward a resistance to commodity logic, they are also banal and voyeuristic—surveillance shots of Lester's teenage daughter, and self-absorbed images of garbage blowing in the wind. The camera becomes a commodity to hide behind while positing a resistance to commodity logic through formal idealization rather than critical connection with material reality.

***American Splendor*; or, burying the bones of Reagan**

Finally, *American Splendor*, based on the work of underground comic book artist Harvey Pekar, attempts to move beyond self-indulgent metaphor and toward the metonymic. Pekar's comics evoke a kind of grubby realism, resistant to the cliché expectations of the comic book "superhero" form and rejection of narrative trajectory. He writes about the mundane and ephemeral moments of experience where the profound moment of insight may be found—or not. In any case, these are the experiences

through which life is lived, though we should not over-simplify the first person narrative of the comics with the assumption that the Harvey Pekar drawn on the page is the real Pekar in the flesh. The filmmakers, with great admiration for Pekar's art, do however describe the adaptation process with an assumption of indexical realism: "We have a documentary film background, so we approached the comic books as if they were raw footage."²⁶ While his material is adopted into a conventional cinematic narrative form with a recognizable story arc not found in the original comics, what is interesting is the way that form is ruptured with intrusions of the everyday. Where *To Die For*, *American Beauty* and *American Psycho* provide a blank gaze at the material emptiness of post-Reagan America and a turn away from social reality, *American Splendor* is a return to the realist gestures of 1970s American film, but inflected through a destabilization of genre categories and a rejection of the blank gaze of irony. It brings us back to the dilemma of *American Dream*, the question of what is left in the ruins of post-Fordism.

In his *American Splendor* comic serial, Pekar's approach is observational, with an affinity to documentary, and his world is populated by marginal working-class characters who are granted brief moments of dignity in a voice that is not co-opted into

the media monologue. But these are not traditional objective documentaries; rather, the process of making the comic, of transcending the limits of the everyday in art-making, is integrated in the text. The stories are rooted in the situations of conflict and boredom structuring Pekar's everyday life. As Amy Taubin describes the work: "His compulsion to flaunt the failures of the flesh and his own dirty laundry (literally) in his comics is balanced by his gallant belief in creativity as a means of redemption."²⁷ There is no singular master narrative outside of this broad trajectory of redemption and failure. While the writing is autobiographical, different artists are employed to illustrate different stories, creating multiple encounters with the real. The film reflects this sensibility by using Pekar himself as narrator, while casting the actor Paul Giametti in the lead role of the character called Harvey Pekar, and integrating documentary elements (with commentary by Pekar) within the fictional narrative to provide metonymic referents to the everyday and to destabilize the ideological coherence of narrative. In turn, animated backgrounds are incorporated into various narrative monologues, bringing this realism back into the constructed comic realm.

The genre borders entirely blur when Giametti as Harvey appears in the same frame as the so-called "real" Harvey in one of many meta-commentary scenes. These are recurring episodes where Harvey, with his wife and collaborator Joyce Brabner, comment on the film and on comic art. The setting for these scenes is visually flat, an aesthetic further emphasized by recording these scenes on HD rather than on celluloid—looking like the pages of a comic book—while the "realist" cinematography of the narrative sequences depict a stark and rusting post-fordist Cleveland, where Pekar lives. The tonal quality of these Cleveland sequences recalls, for me at least, the landscape of post-Vietnam despair in *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978).²⁸ While there is no real narrative or genre link between these films, the tonal quality is a kind of specter of an earlier generation of American cinema, while the characters populating Pekar's comics are, implicitly at least, haunted by the specter of Vietnam. Pekar himself was employed for most of his working days until retirement as a file clerk at a Cleveland Veteran's Administration Hospital, many of his characters are the walking wounded of a war-bound society, and his 2003 edition of *American Splendor* was entirely devoted to the story of a Vietnam combat veteran named Robert MacNeill.

The interlacing of narrative and documentary is exemplified in the "jelly bean" sequence (Reagan's favorite snack). The character Harvey stands amidst the hospital patient files and is sharing some jelly beans with his friend and co-worker Toby (who frequently appears in the comic, proudly self-identified as a "nerd"). We see a close up of jelly beans in hand and then a wide shot on a studio soundstage where we see the camera and crew completing the shot. It is this soundstage space that is designed to suggest the flat panels of a comic book. When the director calls "cut" the actors playing Harvey and Toby step to the background (but remain in the frame) and observe as the "real" Harvey and Toby move to the craft services table to help themselves to snacks and discuss the flavors of the various jelly

beans. The conversation is banal and yet exemplifies the quotidian bond between these individuals. What we see in the frame is a kind of mis-en-abime of representation with the actors watching the people they play on screen "act" as themselves within the artifice of the soundstage.

It is important to consider the contrast between the effort to articulate the dignity and poetry of the everyday (as well as the indignity and noise) in *American Splendor* and the faux quotidian form of Reality TV where the staging of reality is overdetermined by stereotype characters and melodramatic and/or game-show genre conventions. While this form of popular entertainment denotes the everyday, it also buries it under the media spectacle. Similarly, Matthew Pustz describes the stylistic approach of alternative comics providing critical saliency that is at odds with mainstream fare: "Stories about average, everyday people in alternative comics...emphasize the silliness of mainstream comic book stories about overly muscled men and women in impossibly skintight costumes saving the universe from other similarly garbed individuals."²⁹ This critique is also expressed in the series of television appearances Pekar made on the *David Letterman Show* throughout the 1980s, which he documented in his comics and are referenced in the film. Like all television talk shows, Letterman is broadcast to provide a venue for the promotion of celebrity culture, but the specific niche in the case of the Letterman show is to contrast celebrity gloss with a mocking (and typically mean-spirited) gaze at the ordinary in recurring segments such as "Stupid Pet Tricks" and "Stupid Human Tricks," as well as with decidedly non-celebrity guests such as Pekar. In this way, and in contrast with *American Splendor*, viewers are positioned at a distance from the everyday rather than drawn into the quotidian rhythms.

The film uses reconstructions of Pekar's appearances on Letterman in such a way as to both blur the distinction between drama and documentary as well as to facilitate a critique of dominant media. We see Paul Giametti as Pekar backstage before his TV appearance and in a matched cut we see footage of the "real" Harvey step on stage. But given the staged unreality of television, is this footage any more authentic? In one of his appearances used in the film, Pekar says to Letterman: "It's your world, I'm just living in it." The line points to the hegemonic function of dominant media and suggests the determinant relation between media, wealth, and power. It is Pekar's final Letterman show appearance that had to be staged as the "real" footage was not made available to the filmmakers. Here, Pekar entirely rejects the format of television glibness and aggressively raises the critical issue of the political economy of the media. He wants to talk about the NBC Network's corporate owners, General Electric, and their very profitable role in the munitions and nuclear industries. This shift in topic is seen as unwelcome and Pekar is no longer invited onto the show, though the film squanders the opportunity to further develop critical political inquiry by instead emphasizing Pekar as an angry and uncompromising individual.

Nonetheless, the representation of these media representations in the film sets up a critical resistance to the commodity-logic flow of mainstream media, and is consistent with the film's



blurring of distinctions between forms of expression—a blurring which contributes to a rethinking of the dominant ethos through which culture and expression are organized. Moreover, the experience becomes a part of Pekar's comic and is, in turn, re-represented (and altered) in the film. As one commentator describes the documentary form of this style of artmaking: "art filters into life, alerting us to our own participation in the author's self-construction."³⁰ The high point of art cinema often took the form of self-referentiality and emerged at a time of re-energized national cinema movements, and in many cases with subsidies for innovative work. In turn, these nationalist cultural products were distributed internationally. In the contemporary era we see an intensification of American culture through the dominance of media (corresponding with a decline in state subsidies for art cinema) as an export commodity and that is matched in aesthetic approaches where, in the words of Stuart Hall, postmodernism is "how the world dreams itself to be 'American'."³¹

The films I have discussed emerge in a context of intensified globalization and the rise of a global media industry whereby national culture movements have become less relevant. This condition does not eradicate difference in cultural expression but does significantly influence form and determine the condition of expression. The function of the media industries in this context is to produce not only a product that can be exported internationally and play in multiple commodity forms, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, to produce "a feeling of ease, well-being, [and] satisfaction."³² Harvey Pekar, in the pages of his comic book and in the film, seeks to destabilize this impulse. He is a crank like Hunter S. Thompson, pointing out that the emperor is only clothed in the greed and hysteria of the bombs and Jesus crowd. In contrast, in contemporary independent film, with notable exceptions, the narrative typically takes as given the spectacle function of politics and the overdetermination of media culture within the public sphere—functioning to produce not the shock of the new but the narcotic of the commodity image.

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Notes

- 1 Hunter S. Thompson, *Generation of Swine: Gonzo Papers Vol. 2: Tales of Shame and Degradation in the 80s* (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1988), p. 18. At the time of his death (by suicide) in 2005 many media commentators suggested that his perspective and approach to journalism, while initially innovative, had become increasingly irrelevant. The trenchant quote I use at the beginning of this essay gives the lie to this self-righteousness. Thompson is as relevant today as it was two decades ago, his work can best be characterized as an intense foraging through the remains of the counter-culture era.
- 2 As of May 2008, the Project's web page is no longer functional. For an overview of the PNAC, see this article by William Rivers Pitt: <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article1665.htm>

- 3 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Knopf, 2007).
- 4 Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. xvi.
- 5 Ibid., p. 117.
- 6 John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers, and Dykes* (New York: Hyperion-Miramax, 1995), see especially page 129.
- 7 Susan Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 10.
- 8 Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 294.
- 9 Ibid., p. 296.
- 10 Jodi Brooks, "Ghosting the Machine: The Sounds of Tap and the Sounds of Film," *Screen* 44:4 (Winter 2003): 360.
- 11 Joyce Millman, "The King of Comedy (review)," *Salon* (March 1997), accessed on-line, June 12, 2007: <<http://www.salon.com/march97/millman970321.html>>.
- 12 Ray, p. 366.
- 13 In a speech responding to the rise of student radicals at Berkeley. See: *San Francisco Chronicle*, early morning edition, 15 May 1969; echoed by Bush Jr. in his 2003 "bring 'em on" schoolyard taunt directed at resistance fighters in Iraq and elsewhere. Peter Biskind has claimed the art cinema credential for American film by suggesting that *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) is the American *Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960) because the film corresponds with the violence of the time: *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Touchstone-Simon and Shuster, 1998), p. 35.
- 14 Biskind, p. 164.
- 15 Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 89.
- 16 Ray, p. 326.
- 17 Wasser, p. 15.
- 18 Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan: the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 4.
- 19 Steven Prince, *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Praeger, 1992), p. 4.
- 20 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 182.
- 21 Prince, *Pot of Gold*, p. 133.
- 22 Henry A. Giroux, and Imre Szeman, "Ikea Boy Fights Back: *Fight Club*, Consumerism, and the Political Limits of Nineties Cinema," in *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*. Ed. Jon Lewis (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 96. For a counterpoint that examines the critical, if contradictory, impulse of *Fight Club*, see John McCullough, "Tedium and Torture: *Fight Club*, Globalization and Professionals in Crisis," *Cineaction* 65 (2004): 44-53. McCullough says: "The film's perspective is that contemporary capitalism is enough to make you want to kill yourself. More precisely, the film represents life in capitalism as already a version of death, to the extent that it is regimented by an ethic which denigrates the authentic and the real, in favor of the copy and simulations" (p53).
- 23 Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 76.
- 24 Jeffrey Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart Film,'" *Screen* 43:4 (Winter 2002): 364.
- 25 Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, "'Too Close for Comfort': *American Beauty* and the Incest Motif," *Cinema Journal* 44:1 (Fall 2004): 71.
- 26 Dennis West and Joan M. West with Anne Gilbert, "Splendid Misery: An Interview with Robert Pulcini and Shari Springer Berman," *Cineaste* (Fall 2003): 41.
- 27 "Cleveland Heights: Amy Taubin on *American Splendor*," *Artforum* (Summer 2003): 59.
- 28 This stylistic influence is confirmed by the filmmakers in the *Cineaste* interview, p. 41.
- 29 Matthew Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson MI: Mississippi University Press, 1999), p. 91.
- 30 Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson MI: Mississippi University Press, 2005), p. 126. The author makes the case for comics as a form of literature and reiterates a distinction of this kind of serious comic art from the movies, p. 33.
- 31 "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview With Stuart Hall," edited by Lawrence Grossberg in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 132.
- 32 Hardt and Negri, p. 293.

Throughout the Western world, the 1960s were a time of immense cinematic innovation. In France, the person who most epitomized this phenomenon was, unquestionably, Jean-Luc Godard and he is still active today. Indeed, if from *À bout de souffle* (1960) to *Notre Musique* (2004) Godard has retained the ability, as Jean Cocteau once said about Igor Stravinsky, to find a fresh spot on the pillow, it is because, from the outset, he has *thought* cinema in an individual way.

Less sequential than disjunctive, less logical than analogical, even his later films, although more relaxed, are as innovative as ever. It is this individual way of thinking that I'd like to examine. Arguably, it informs his entire output as, possibly, it has informed his entire life.

Analogical Thinking

organizational strategies within the work of
Jean-Luc Godard



*L'Analogie est un moyen de création—C'est une ressemblance de rapports; or de la nature de ces rapports dépend la force ou la faiblesse de l'image créée.*²

—Pierre Reverdy, *L'Image* (1918)

In *JLG/JLG—autoportrait de décembre* (1994), there is a moment when Jean-Luc Godard is sitting at his desk. On the desktop are paper and pens. He has been reading from Wittgenstein and Diderot—Wittgenstein on certainty and Diderot on blindness. He begins to talk about Jeannot which, he explains, rhymes with stereo—as if the creative use he now makes of sound has been influenced by his name.

He draws a triangle, first in black, then in red; first right-side up, then upside-down—intersecting to form a hexagon. Stereo projects Jeannot, the responsive function, he explains. Within the history of stereo, of triangles that respond to one another, Godard clarifies, the Euclidean triangle projected Pascal, as Germany did Israel, and (while we hear thunder in the background) Israel necessitated Palestine.

This sequence encapsulates the artistic thinking of Jean-Luc Godard. As a tribute to Pierre Reverdy, let us call it analogical thinking. Even if disjunctively, one image leads to another. Every sound has its projection; every statement its dialectical opposite. Written ninety years ago, Reverdy's disquisition on the image is a celebration of analogical thinking. References to it occur in *Passion* (1982), *King Lear* (1987) *JLG/JLG*, and *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989-97).

Thoroughly to investigate the validity of this idea could involve a substantial philosophical digression. As far back as the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant was arguing that the mind is less a passive receptor of experience than an active processor of it, that we know the phenomena of the world less in themselves than through their representations.³ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Henri Bergson championed intuitive over intellectual models of perception, positing an *élan vital* as a creative process of apprehending the world.⁴ And more recently, philosophers of mind have begun to re-examine analogical as opposed to digital models, continuous-time systems as distinct from discrete-time systems—systems that can distinguish between the biological and computational functions of the human brain.⁵ If I understand them sufficiently, these examinations offer a more scientific endorsement of the intuitive potentiality of mind, especially concerning its ability to synthesize disparate bits of information into new intelligible wholes.

Such a digression, however, invokes a territory I have no wish to enter. It defines a field in which I am more a rambler than a cultivator. For this essay, I would rather return to more manageable matters—to an investigation of how this process of analogical thinking, whatever its philosophical justifications, informs the way by which Godard constructs his cinematic works.

Analogical thinking is crucial to the binary organization of the films of Jean-Luc Godard. It inflects his montage, affects his addiction to citation and, while filling his work with irresolvable contradictions, it imbricates absurdity with the sublime.

In Godard's image productions, the less concerned they are with narrative, the more they are dependent on analogical thinking to unify their elements. Like characters in conventional films, in Godard binaries struggle with one another. The battle is never easy. If on/off and yes/no seem equal and symmetrical, female/male never is. Nor is nature/culture, documentary/ fiction, or Romantic/Classical. Even yes/no results in different positions of the mouth and in different effects within human interaction—an insight concisely recapitulated during the final moments of *Armide* (1987) when the two young woman scream out their acceptance or refusal of the male indifference to their offers of love they have had to endure.

Although binaries pervade Godard, the video essays are exemplary. Displaying the physical presence of both Miéville and Godard, *Soft and Hard* (1986) is a *locus classicus* of asymmetrical structure. The three "video-scenarios" are equally interesting in their differences from one another, but *Scénario du film Passion* (1982) is the most specific about the process of creation. Like the feature it refers to, it is, of course, a fiction; but again like the feature, it is a fiction that examines the way it *thinks* fiction as it goes along.

Scénario du film Passion establishes a dialogue between the video technology that surrounds Godard and the empty screen that confronts him. How to fill that empty screen? How to inscribe the televisual equivalent of Mallarmé's *page blanche* with characters and dialogue that might become a film.

The renewed faith in the image that characterizes Godard's mature work leads to the desire to *see* before he *writes*. Yet less to see than to receive—as he can pun in French, less *voir* than *re-ce-voir*. To the sounds of Fauré's *Requiem*, the first image that is "received" is of a naked woman ascending a staircase to take her place within an historically determined tableau—Godard's carnalization of El Greco's *Assumption of the Virgin* (1608-1613).⁶ Later, we see a still of another woman with flowers (Hanna Schygulla) being chased by a car in a space not yet fully imagined.

Thus we have the major dyadic structure of this work, the transcendent and the terrestrial—the iconized ideal inherited from the past and the dramatized real emerging in the present. Sometimes complementary, sometimes in opposition, these dyads roil our conditioned reflexes, leading us into new areas of affection and interpretation. And always, increasingly important in late Godard, there is the dimension of sound, itself part of the image-structure of the film.

For instance, if Fauré's *Requiem* seems in accord with the ascension motif of the El Greco tableau, what are we to make of the apparent discord of Mozart's *Requiem* played over some petrol pumps while a truck-load of new cars rumbles by in the background? In their discussion of *Passion*, Silverman and Farocki distinguish between oxymoron and analogue, between

dyads that retain their difference and those that suggest similarity.⁷ I should like to suggest, however, that the apparent discrepancy between aural and visual images is potentially more playful. It often suggests irony, even when inducing a sense of the sublime.

The video, however, keeps grounding itself in its discussion of images—on the need to see before writing. Like Tintoretto's *Ariadne, Venus and Bacchus* (1576), as Godard has explained when showing us the painting, his film will be about a man and two women and will explore the relationship between them. It will also explore the relationship between gestures of labour and gestures of love. Following this logic of association, of analogy, sometimes simply of assonance, Godard begins to construct his script.

There will be a space with objects in it, he explains, a hotel and a factory, between which (*entre*) the characters enter (*entrent*). When the characters become clear, then actions can be imagined and words can be found. Jerzy will arrive, an exiled filmmaker, like Godard himself, looking for work. Since Jerzy is an actor, there will be action, Godard explains, "as in American films." And Jerzy will be attracted both to Hanna and to Isabelle—the one open and the other closed. As Philippe Dubois has explained the process taking place in the video "laboratory" of Godard's imaginary inventiveness:

The images ... appear, little by little, very slowly, in waves, as if bubbling up from the bottom of his thought-in-process, superimposing themselves on the silhouette of his own body, which haunts the "laboratory."⁸

Approaching the video in this way, I have scarcely done justice to its insistence on binaries. Even the characters are described as double: we see Jerzy as a modern-day Jacob wrestling with his angel. As Godard has explained, however, it is *between* these two selves, as *between* the different spaces, that the struggles occur. Paul Willeman once suggested that this emphasis on the *between* is "the ultimate refusal of binarism;"⁹ and Gilles Deleuze has insisted that what matters in Godard is "the interstice ... between two images."¹⁰ And between two impulses, I would want to add, possibly between two conflicting desires—like the longing for grace and the need for gravity.

These ideas lead to a consideration of the virtually mystical emphasis that Godard now places on montage. Jacques Aumont has claimed that, in Godard, the purpose of montage is to bring forth the full potential of the image.¹¹ But as I have just suggested, another kind of montage occurs between sequences as well as between shots as it does as well *within* the images themselves.

In *Pierrot le fou* (1965) we may remember a tiny man with a huge bottle of coke; or in *Anticipation* (1967), Anna Karina arranging her hair with a Brobdignagian comb. In *Passion*, Michel (Piccoli) suffers from smoker's hack, apparently caused by a rose. Like the full-size Crusaders prancing about the miniature sets of Delacroix's Constantinople, these instances of montage within the frame give these films a surreal dimension. Because most of the characters in *Passion* have been searching for love, the penultimate sequence may well reference (as

Silverman has suggested) Watteau's *Pilgrimage to Cythera* (1719);¹² but it might more easily evoke the surreally red sails of Nosferatu's nefarious voyage in Werner Herzog's remake of that obsessional quest.

Finally, citation itself might be understood as *referential* montage. Janet Bergstrom has mentioned "the *extending* strategy" of citation in Godard;¹³ and certainly, citation further compounds the analogical suggestiveness of any combination of images, whether between or within frames. That anachronistic ship in the field with a tractor is a surreal montage *within* the frame as Hanna runs about looking for Jerzy. Add to this incongruity the actual sheep elsewhere in the field just after we have heard Fauré's "Agnus Dei" accompanying the defloration of Isabelle and we have a concatenation of associations that, as so often in Godard, are extremely funny in their surface absurdity but which are also deeply moving in the allusive range of implications that all the images, both visual and aural, might have for us.

If we return to the poetic thesis by Pierre Reverdy with which I began this discussion, we might be able to draw together some of the above observations. The most extended reference to this thesis occurs in *King Lear*. As images form and re-form themselves on twin television monitors at the right of the screen, Godard speaks his reworking of the text:

Analogy is a medium of creation. It is a resemblance of connections. The power or virtue of a recreated image depends on the nature of these connections.

What is great is not the image but the emotion that it provokes. If the latter is great, one values the image for its own sake. The emotion thus provoked is true because it is born outside of all limitation, of evocation, and all resemblance.

Throughout this monologue, as images transform themselves while the sound of gulls suggests, with characteristic irony, that "Nature's above art, in that respect,"¹⁴ we can see that, when confronted by the blank screen, when searching for images, Godard free associates. Like his discussion of the shot/reverse shot in *Notre Musique*,¹⁵ through a process of collage, analogies are discovered which possess their own form of narrative logic—by-passing the sequential linearity of rational thought. Image precedes idea, idea suggests space, space sanctions character, and character enables dialogue. This process lifts the mundane realities of everyday life into the surreal—but less the surrealism of dreams and fantasies than of fresh ways of *imaging* the world, of establishing fresh perspectives, a new sense of proportion.

By fusing disjunctive and conjunctive conceptual realities, by yoking by violence different images together,¹⁶ in the collision of these forces—within the interstices—explosive insights are generated and creative forms emerge. The obsession with character and plot endemic to Hollywood practice confines both films and spectators within the quotidian realities of our day-to-day world. Where there are no interstices, there is no imagination. No new insights can occur—certainly, not for audiences.

Godard's analogical thinking involves risk. It courts preten-

sion and encounters failure. Nevertheless, evolving through patterns of progress and recursion, it is a process of organization that leads to fresh insights and which places—and allows—great imaginative responsibility on spectators.

For me, this received responsibility is the true value of Godard's on-going obsession with montage. Not only in the early days was he replying to André Bazin's championing of the sequence shot but he recognized that cinematic creation cannot take place just through representations of the real—as in documentary—but must occur through their collision with fiction. As he explains at the end of *Scénario du film Passion*, although the possibilities are infinite,

this infinity will end in metaphor attended by reality. You know the film can be made at the crossroads between reality and metaphor. Or between documentary and fiction.

If there is validity in Willimen's insistence on the idea of a "between" that destroys binary oppositions and in Deleuze's concept of the interval, I should like to suggest that the third term is most easily located in the minds of spectators. As Godard himself has written about the early days of cinema:

It was something that filmed not things, but the relationships between things. In other words, people saw relationships, and first of all they saw a relationship with themselves.¹⁷

This freedom to achieve our own understanding of the relationship between fresh syntheses of sounds and images is what makes even an imperfect film by Godard such an exhilarating experience. Throughout the years in his films, I have been struck by the instability of tone. Over time, this tonal ambivalence is perhaps the most Brechtian aspect of his work. Even at their most serious—in *Deux ou trois choses, Passion, Je vous salue, Marie, Nouvelle Vague*—in true Brechtian fashion the films allow us to laugh while the characters are crying and to cry when they are laughing.

In *Scénario du film Passion*, when Jerzy's crane is flying above the miniature sets of Constantinople and Godard speaks of turning a camera movement into a prayer; and when actual sheep scurry about the fields after we have heard "Angus Dei" on the sound-track, we are in the realm simultaneously of the absurd and the wonderful. While we may smile at the wit of these outlandish analogies, we may also feel we are in the presence of the sublime.

Frederic Jameson has suggested that in Godard the sublime occurs through his desire "to do something with the camera that matches ecstatic moments only music was supposed to achieve ..."¹⁸ and Deleuze, following Kant, has proposed that

... what constitutes the sublime is that the imagination suffers a shock which pushes it to the limit and forces thought to think the whole as intellectual totality which goes beyond the imagination.¹⁹

In Godard, however—an indication of his humility, indeed, of his

humanity—the sublime is always inflected by irony. Undoubtedly, there is in late Godard a longing for "monadic closure."²⁰ Certainly, there is also, as James Williams has suggested, "a nostalgia for the plenitude of meaning in cinema and art...";²¹ but there is also a sense of absurdity at his own necessities, as there is at the necessities of his obsessional characters.

Confronting the blank screen and his desire for creation; faced with his determination to achieve a productive dialogue between the dyads of his inventions; allowing the spaces between these dyads to be filled in by spectators, Godard has achieved a cinema of sublimity within a world which is absurd. The "most writerly of filmmakers," as Raymond Bellour has suggested,²² a passionate believer within a world of disbelief, Jean-Luc Godard is a cinematic modernist in a post-modern world.

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Notes

- 1 This essay is an extension of a paper I read at a conference on Godard at the Tate Modern in London in 2001. Many of the proceedings of this event can be found in *For Ever Godard*, ed. By Michael Temple, James S. Williams, and Michael Witt. (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004)
- 2 From *Nord-Sud, Self Defence et Autres Écrits sur l'Art et la Poésie* (1917-1926), by Pierre Reverdy, edited with notes by Étienne-Alain Hubert (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 74
- 3 See "Critique of Aesthetic Judgement," especially pp. 214-225, in *The Critique of Judgement*, by Immanuel Kant, trans. by James Creed Meredith. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952)
- 4 *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903); but see *Creative Evolution*, by Henri Bergson, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1907/1944), 97
- 5 For an analysis of the work of thinkers such as Nelson Goodman, Allen Newell, Gerald Edelman and William Demopoulos (among others), see *The Analog/Digital Distinction in the Philosophy of Mind*, by Ellie Epp. <<http://www.sfu.ca/~elfreda/theory/theory.html>>
- 6 Also known as *The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception*. Given Godard's free rendition of these tableaux, however, he might also be referencing *The Annunciation* (1590-1600)
- 7 *Speaking about Godard*, by Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki (New York: University Press, 1998), 185
- 8 Video Thinks What Cinema Creates," by Philippe Dubois. *Jean-Luc Godard—Son+Image, 1974-1991* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 178
- 9 "Passion 3," in *Framework* 21 (1983), 7
- 10 *Cinema 2—The Time-Image*, by Gilles Deleuze, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson & Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, (1985/1989), 179
- 11 *Amnésies: Fictions du cinéma d'après Jean-Luc Godard*, by Jacques Aumont (Paris: P.O.L, 1999), 18
- 12 *Speaking about Godard*, 195
- 13 "Violence and Enunciation," by Janet Bergstrom. *Jean-Luc Godard—Son+Image*, 51
- 14 Appropriately, from *King Lear*, Act IV, Scene 5
- 15 See "Bridges: a discussion of *Notre Musique* by Jean-Luc Godard," by Peter Harcourt. *CineAction* 65 2004, pp.62-63
- 16 As Samuel Johnson claimed for the poetry of John Donne and his contemporaries. "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays*, by T.S. Eliot. (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), p. 283
- 17 *Introduction à une véritable Histoire du Cinéma*, by Jean-Luc Godard. (Paris: Éditions Albatros, 1980), 175.
- 18 *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, by Fredric Jameson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 181
- 19 *Cinema 2—The Time-Image*, 157
- 20 *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 163
- 21 *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Work of Jean-Luc Godard—1985-2000*, ed. by Michael Temple & James S. Williams (Amsterdam University Press, 2000), 136
- 22 "(Not) Just Another Filmmaker," by Raymond Bellour. *Jean-Luc Godard—Son+Image*, 222

The High Solitude of a Rare Bird

KOHEI USUDA

During all the years I have lived in daily contact with Jean Seberg, I have regained from her some of that brave candor you need to win by losing.

—Romain Gary

Once upon a time, there was an actress called Jean Seberg who lived her life. You might have heard of her. Despite her small stature, she was a beautiful creature who captivated everyone in the room. Once on screen, her big blue eyes stared right at you from the enhanced Technicolor screen. Her closely cropped hair, blonde and perfectly sculpted, was chic and modern, novelty and iconic all at the same time. This year, come September 8, marks the 29th anniversary of her prematurely tragic death.

The year was 1956, the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema, of dreams and glamour. Otto Preminger—the big-time Hollywood director of Viennese-origin—while looking for an unknown to play Jeanne d’Arc for his screen adaptation of *Saint Joan*, “discovers” Jean Seberg from Iowa’s farmlands, and introduced her to the blinding Californian sun. Jean was still a teenager then. A fair maiden just like Jeanne d’Arc when she drove the English out of French soil and crowned Charles VII at Rheims. The publicity surrounding Preminger’s search for his Jeanne d’Arc on every remote corner of America—hitherto unheard-of, not since David O. Selznick cast Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*—made this Jean out of Iowa an instant worldwide star even before *Saint Joan* was released.

As was custom in those days, upon Herr Preminger’s request, Jean was “contracted”, and later made a prisoner of Columbia Studio. Thus, she was given the role of Jeanne d’Arc as was promised to her under his watchful eyes.

If you were an actor back in that day, you had no freedom. Led by camera flashes, they hopped from hotel suites to press conferences, then to movie premieres with their dates fixed by the studio. That was the rules of the game: if you were an actor, you simply had to obey what the studio told you.

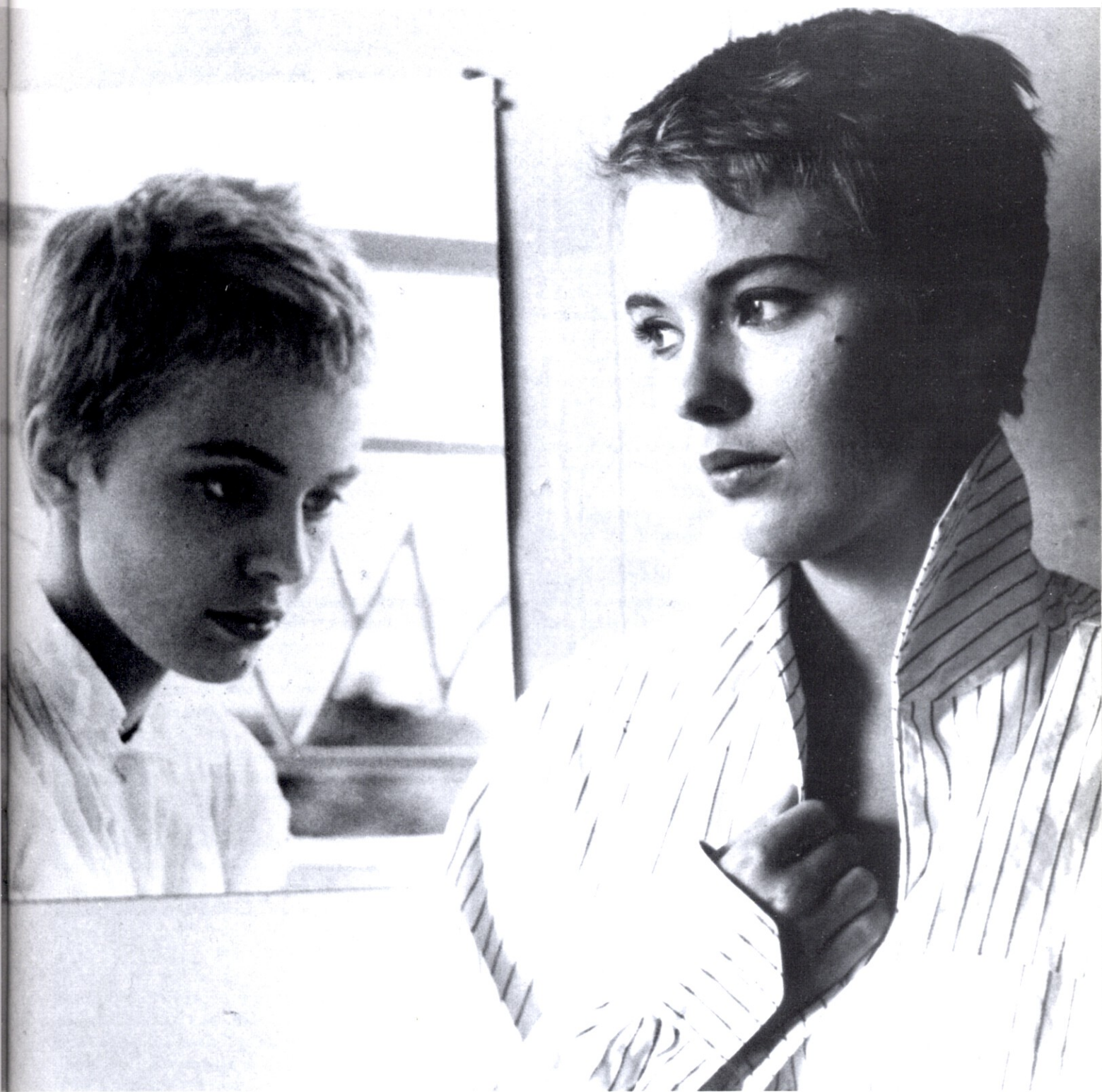
And the maiden out of Iowa was fed up under the Californian sun; she was fed up with Preminger’s constant harassing and his insults, calling her a terrible actress. Fed up, because this Preminger did not understand her; he merely used her as a puppet and cared only about his overall enterprise. Only on rare occasions when he told stories about Vienna, did the old Austrian treat her well. Sometimes after the shoot, Jean had to sit politely in a restaurant and listen to his stories. And it was always the same: Mozart, Freud, Klimt, Schnitzler... To see out her contract, Jean, biting her lip, underwent another tormenting shoot with Preminger, appearing in *Bonjour Tristesse*. The only consolation during the shoot was playing the rebellious character of Cecile, with whom Jean could at least identify.

If you are unhappy... if someone’s always pulling you down by the ankle, you can’t fly... this rare bird Jean... out of Iowa...

Then the year 1959 arrived—the end of the decade, the end of the Golden Age. At last freed from her captivity in Hollywood, Jean took off to Paris to work with the then-unknown, young and charismatic Jean-Luc Godard. For his first film *Breathless*, Godard had given her the role of Patricia, an aspiring American writer with a big dream, making her living in Paris selling *New York Herald Tribune* on the trendy Champs Élysées. In her role as the girlfriend of Jean-Paul Belmondo, an ocean apart from the Californian sun and the Faustian Preminger, Jean blossoms as an actress under Godard’s freewheeling, youthful, and hectic direction.

She must have been what? 21 years old? 21 years old and American, her first time living alone overseas. Jean had arrived in Paris with no translator, no agent, nothing—just a suitcase and a little bit of confidence in herself. Just imagine how free Jean must have felt, speaking her lines in American-accented French, to the applause of Quartier Latin intellectuals. She never knew that a movie shoot could be this fun. By the way, Jean was told, Monsieur Godard doesn’t work from a script. But don’t you worry, mademoiselle, he has his stack of notes to choose from every morning! In those early





days, behind his trademark dark glasses, the young Jean-Luc Godard worked his brain nonstop, always plotting something or the other. He had no girlfriend to speak of and had barely enough pennies to buy a metro ticket. But all he needed was a break. With the financial help of his childhood friend François Truffaut—who had just had a triumph at Cannes—the 30-year-old Godard was given the opportunity of a lifetime to direct his own first movie. But the young *cinéaste* was in doubt: the stake was raised high by Truffaut. He pressured himself every morning before the shoot—after a sleepless night, he is fearful—can he do it? Can he pull it off? It was the fear resembling what a writer must go through in the morning at his desk, face-to-face with a blank piece of paper.

Godard did not know yet that his first film was to trigger a worldwide revolution in filmic language, literally to change the way people watched films. On the vanguard of the “New Wave” of French cinema, Godard liberated the camera from the confines of the studios, and brought it out to the streets of Paris and beyond. And look at those jump-cuts! Hand-held shots! What novelty! Why didn’t anyone think of that before! And Miss Seberg is just marvelous in the film like she’s never been before!

The marching youth of Godard and Truffaut had won over the old guards. Much to Otto Preminger’s and the old-timers’ dismay, the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema had clearly come to an end.

Back in the USA, however, Jean’s acting career did not take off as was expected from her talent. But let’s wait and see.

Romain Gary was in love. He could not believe it when he first laid his eyes on her. The moment Jean came on stage, his heart started racing and didn’t stop until she bowed her head and he realized the play was over. He did everything a gentleman could do to win her over: he bought her flowers, perfumes—only the best kinds—and even dedicated to her a novel he wrote, one which shot up on bestseller lists. “A young man’s heart is entirely attached to a girl. He wastes all his energy, time, money, in order to prove to her at every moment that he is wholly devoted to her.” He remembered reading that passage in Goethe. But he was no longer a young man. Romain Gary spent three fruitless years pursuing Jean; but she was in love with a painter, a lucky fellow much younger than he. Romain Gary even went and bought the young man’s painting at twice its original price, thinking that would make Jean happy. Jean was politically committed or so it seemed; there were even rumours going around then that she was associated with the Black Power Movement. Now and then, he would catch a glimpse of her at a fundraising party, and it was enough to set his heart racing again. Sometimes, Romain Gary would hear a certain melody at a concerto which would resonate in his wounded heart, or overhear a conversation which had no bearing on Jean, and yet such a trifling event would set him once again in a sentimental mood. At first, Jean took him as a silly rich man; sometimes she would come around during those parties and tease him. Jean enjoyed his company but only as a companion. She completely failed, or so she pretended, to see his kindness as more than friendship.

And Romain Gary, afraid to lose her friendship, did not reveal what, in his heart of hearts, he felt for her. His friends, even his mere associates, advised him to give up his love.

Jean began to see things differently since she returned from Paris. Dylan was singing “The Times They Are A-Changin’”. She, too, began to open her eyes to the changing sceneries of the American landscape. Indeed, during those turbulent years in American history, alongside the anti-war campaigner “Hanoi Jane” Fonda—nicknamed after whose controversial visit to North Vietnam—Jean resurfaced as a noted civil rights activist, allying herself with America’s poor and its desolate minorities. Jean sold her image as a movie star, and willingly so, by joining the ranks of Hollywood’s “liberals”. But don’t get her wrong. Why not if the cause she supported could get promoted? “Listen, Romain,” Jean would argue with him, “There’s a school with thirty black kids in it. I got a check for them from Bill Fisher, and it’s worth it. I mean, it’s worth looking laughable... it’s worth all the irony in the eyes of the columnists.”

The year was 1970 and Jean was pregnant with her first child. But then the white men came, intending to destroy everything. The FBI started knocking on her door day and night. To discredit her, masterminded by the FBI, news outlets warned the nation as follows: the well-known actress Jean Seberg, despite her marriage to the French novelist, diplomat, and Resistance hero, Mr. Romain Gary, had in fact been impregnated by an orgy of Black Panthers.

It was a witch hunt time, all right. She was placed on trial along with the rest. Burn her alive!, they yelled. Her marriage and her reputation in shatters, Jean miscarried her first child.

Paris, France, 1974. America continued to burn, but it was all over in France, with the students’ failed coup against the autocratic General de Gaulle now fast becoming a distant memory. The disillusionment filled the air like a big black cloud over Paris, and the conversations in the cafés settled the pessimistic tone.

Enter Philippe Garrel, a young bohemian, a lone filmmaker, a stranger in his own country. Philippe spoke in low, unintelligible mumbles; he didn’t care less if anyone understood what he said—he rarely opened his mouth. He believed in images, god-dam it, not in words!

At the time, he was living and making films with Andy Warhol’s onetime chanteuse, the mother of Alain Delon’s son, the former model of Coco Chanel, the star of Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*: yes it’s Nico, the icy blonde heiress of the cool, the last descendant of the femmes fatales, the mysterious second coming of Marlene Dietrich. Since her escape from New York’s hip downtown scene—brokenhearted by Jimmie Morrison, Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, you name it—things had gotten pretty bad. She was now a girl without a past, sitting nonchalantly at the bottom of the pit, down and out in the City of Light with the young Philippe at her side.

It goes something like this: when Philippe told Nico that the electricity was cut off in their flat—because he had spent their last savings on film stock he couldn’t afford—he told her that it didn’t matter anyways because they loved one another. What else did they need?

NICO (joking): So love will keep us warm, light our way, feed us, and protect us?

PHILIPPE (dead serious): That's it! That is the most precise definition of love I've ever heard!

Were they happy together? No, happiness wasn't the right word. They wanted change; they wanted to change their life and be the heroes. Imagine a scene: the harsh Paris winter, under the blankets, shivering cold, dim candlelight, and cigarette butts on the floor. Ever since their fateful meeting in Grottaferatta, Italy, whenever they could get hold of some cash—enough to buy expired black-and-white film stock—Philippe and Nico made films about the mythology of Jesus and Virgin Mary, about their own solitudes in their dark and cold flat...

There are holes in his pockets. But so what? Philippe was dirt poor but immensely proud, and everyone respected him, calling him "the monk of cinema"... Godard used to give him a ride along the Seine in the back seat of his red Ferrari; and one day he was telling his young protégé: "I heard that Jean Seberg is back in Paris..."

It was indeed the darkest period of Jean's life. Tragedy had fallen upon Jean's fate and it was beyond her control, beyond what a human being can handle. With her marriage in tatters, Jean was now back in Paris, trying to forget the child she never had. So, while in Paris nursing her wound, Jean befriended Philippe Garrel.

For sometime now, Nico had left Philippe. With her junky habits only worsening, one day she left him for a younger lover, just like that, for good. "It's all for the best," Nico said, "for all tomorrow's parties..."

Then Jean came around. She told Philippe, clinging to his trench coat and whispering in his ear: "Let's make a film, Philippe, just you and I. Make me forget about my child..."

Philippe was able to amass enough cash to get hold of a camera and film stock, but not enough to pay for a film crew, or for that matter, the basic equipment required to make a proper film... "But no matter," Philippe said to Jean.

His desire so strong, his beliefs so intact, this monk of cinema, longed to work with Miss Seberg, the star of Preminger, Robert Rossen, and Jean-Luc Godard. If there's an actress and a filmmaker wanting to work together, it must be possible to make a film no matter what comes their way. It has always been this way, he convinces himself, from D.W. Griffith and Lillian Gish to Godard and Anna Karina... To make a film you only need a girl and a gun. The history of cinema was made by the couples and the film is their child...

Philippe and Jean, they called their "child": *Les Hautes solitudes*. Despite the poverty of the means employed to craft the film—or let us say because of it—it was to become Jean's favourite film of her career.

It could be said that *Les Hautes solitudes* testifies to Philippe Garrel's compromised position at the time of the production. To begin with, economic limitations necessitated that the film had no

plot or storyline to speak of; and, using expired film stock, the images were grainy and black-and-white; what is more, the film had no sound at all. The result is that the images of Jean are all there are. During the shoot, Philippe would let her recite a poem she had written, enact a scene from *Saint Joan*, or simply he filmed her silent self. But this film, made up entirely of fragments, of bits and ends, with no beginning, middle, or end—like a film pieced together from the cutting room floor—can one call this a "film" at all? Philippe Garrel would proudly say: Well, it's true, it is no more than a series of portraits of Jean Seberg... but *it is a film no less*. And it's a great one at that: a film devoted wholly to just one actress, like an altar praising Jean's singular and unique beauty.

Les Hautes solitudes, in moving away from narrative proper, and by concentrating on her body, gestures, movements, and silence, made Jean's presence felt strongly inside the projected images on screen, in the course of its 70-odd minutes. Provided you could bear to share the silence with her, and to witness her high solitude.

If you are unhappy, if someone's always pulling you down by the ankle, you can't fly... this rare bird Jean S.... she's only a human... she's no saint like Jeanne d'Arc... just another lonely girl from Iowa...

Shortly after the shoot, Jean was pronounced a maniac depressive, insane. They put her in a mental hospital in the outskirts of Paris, and you know what it meant in those days, to be in one of those places: Jean underwent electroshock therapy.

They say, "Put an innocent man in jail, and he turns into a criminal." The same is true with lunatic asylums. Less than five years after *Les Hautes solitudes*, Jean Seberg, aged 40, commits suicide.

Les Hautes solitudes, a film I have never seen... but a film I've dreamt about, creating and recreating in my dreams. Does it really exist?

Because I have not seen it, I have the liberty to dream and to imagine. And because I cannot watch it, because I'm deprived of its images, I've longed one day to "remake" the film myself...

Let us, you and I, recreate this lost film, as though we're entering into a magnificent city.

For the 2006 Fall collections, Mariacarla Bescono, the It girl of the year, sensationally dropped her long straight brunette in favour of blonde pixie cut in the style of Jean Seberg. Ever an icon, Jean lived on in the form of Mariacarla, catwalking like a phantom across Europe on the runways of haute couture.

In 1968, while giving a lecture at University of Southern California, Godard was asked by an American film student: "Are you trying to change the way we watch films?" He answered the student: "I'm trying to change the world, yes."

Kohei Usuda is a Toronto-based filmmaker. His work includes the short film *Americana* (2003) and video installation *Portrait Film #1 and #2* (2007). His most recent film is *Every time unique, the end of the world* (2008). He has also written for the magazine *Cinema Scope*.



Fellini Goes to the Beach

GEORGE PORCARI

Characters in Fellini's films often end up at the beach where they seem to arrive at some sort of self-realization that is intuitive and physical; the relationship between them and the sea seems to act as a catalyst for a certain kind of knowledge. The ocean—after so much art photography and film—has come to symbolize “nature”, the “eternal”, the “origin of life”. The sea is always the same and never the same; it is beautiful and terrifying; it is sublime and banal; ripples that last a few seconds on film suggest a geologic time that stretches back beyond our common human history. Yet paradoxically the sea is always absolutely physically present as a particular place: St Tropez in the 1960s is not the same as Liverpool in the 1930s. Location and seasonal referents are not the only ways we read images of the sea. The photographic emulsion used also figures in the equation of how an image feels and what time period it seems to belong to. It is impossible in that sense to see the sea—once it is represented we must see it through a variety of cultural conventions that have their own baggage and emotional connotations. But what is the nature of this realization, this knowledge that characters in Fellini's films experience when they see the sea? What happens to Zampano at the end of *La Strada*? What is going on with Marcello as he shrugs his shoulders and slouches away in *La Dolce Vita*? What does Leopoldo's sexual panic in *Il Vitelloni* mean when it takes place by the sea? What is Saraghina's wild dance on the sand in *8 1/2* about?

Fellini's work was, as he said in an interview, very much informed from his reading of Jung that influenced much of his work in the studio from *8 1/2* to *The Voice of the Moon*, his final feature film. It was at that point that he started to consciously create archetypes on the set, rather than go to a location and film the passing moment. That is, the “ocean” rather than a particular seashore at a particular place and time. This sense of the essentialist, the absolute, which is found in the archetype, is the opposite of a realist tendency in which a temporal material reality in the present tense is all there is. Both tendencies are to be found in Fellini throughout his work and he seems to favor one or the other depending on the material. Yet his body of work does have a trajectory: it moves from his beginnings in Neo-Realism up to *La Strada* then shifts to favoring archetypal studio creations, from *Juliet of the Spirits* onwards. *La Dolce Vita* and *8 1/2* straddle both worlds, and in part for that very reason may be his most interesting films. Yet the sea in *The White Sheik*, an early work, is totally theatrical despite the fact that it was shot on location, because of the context, while the sea at the end of *Satyricon*, a middle period work, is very real—in a documentary sense—and gives weight to the fantastic narrative. So in effect there is no clearly systematic approach that one can use to understand Fellini's use of the ocean





in his work—let us then look at individual works.

In *The White Sheik* the variety shows actors are on a beach that is highly individualized as belonging to the Mediterranean world. The fantastic sight of the Sheik in full costume creates a dichotomy between his theatrical poses, his artificiality, his buffoonery and the naturalness of the landscape. The landscape in effect puts into question the Sheik's integrity, it creates a context that enables us to see through the façade of a pompous playboy in a way that the character of the young woman who lusts after him cannot. When we see the Sheik rocking on a gigantic swing—his sex prominently seen from below—we know we are seeing him through her eyes. At the same time the swing turns the Sheik into a boy playing with exotic costumes and children's toys. Her lust becomes both comical—because it is based on a fantasy image that we can see through—and moving because the ocean turns her sexual need into an archetype of fertility. It is nature itself expressing itself through cultural conventions. Her passion for the Sheik has historical roots in Western culture. In the early 20th century "eastern" looking males and females could be overtly sexualized—as was the case with Valentino and Pola Negri in the Hollywood of the twenties—in a way not available to westerners in the popular arts. Theirs was a mythical personae that was free, sensual and given fully to the taking and the giving of pleasure without guilt. This fantasy is a powerful sexual stimulus to the imagination throughout western history, from Delacroix's imaginative "Persia"—created in Paris, to Josef Von Sternberg's "Shanghai"—created in the deserts of Los Angeles.

The Sheik's persona as a Latin lover is already dated by 1952—the year Fellini made his film. The Sheik—as a cultural artifact—finished his days in provincial variety shows and the photo-serials that are the subject of the film. Fellini would—from the beginning—show enormous sympathy for his characters and allow us to see the world through their eyes, while simultaneously using landscapes as a counterpoint to their cultural prejudices and their acceptance of social conventions. The film charts their passions and the role that fantasy—unbeknownst to them—plays in their search for love and fulfillment.

In *La Strada* the seashore at the end of the film into which Zampano sheds his tears is a particular ocean, although we see only a small segment of it because it is night, the waves that wash up behind Zampano's body as he looks around helplessly on his knees are shot realistically using high contrast black and white film. The rhythm of this ocean, the sounds it makes, and the emotional exchange between this particular part of the ocean with this character create a whole world into which we may not only "read" but feel Zampano's loss. Gelsomina—his ex-partner is someone that he in a sense both liberates from poverty and emotionally devastates. The only clue that she ever existed is the song that she sings throughout the film and that she has passed on to the woman that took care of her towards the end of her life. Recognizing that song is how Zampano begins the process of recognizing his own loss. When he drunkenly screams to some men throwing him out of a bar that he doesn't need anyone, we know it is not true in large part because the ocean is there as a reminder of Gelsomina's truth: in nature needing others is a biological necessity. The landscape

at night makes Zampano's isolation dramatically intense because it reiterates Gelsomina's emotional needs without ever making them explicit. The ocean here functions not so much metaphorically—as in the sentence "an ocean of tears" but rather metonymically: The ocean is both organic and fertile and a void of black space of nothingness. The two brilliantly fuse and we sense the interconnectedness of life and death, not in any obvious way, but as an inevitable conclusion to our understanding of Zampano's temperament and how it led to his failure to connect with the one person that cared for him.

At the end of *La Dolce Vita* there is a contrast between the seashore, which is as real as the one in *La Strada*, and the monstrous fish that washes up on it, which is an archetype for the pre-historic gelatinous origins of man; fertile and feminine, grotesquely stuffed with other fish, it is dead, yet its one eye still "looking" at the guilty Marcello and his bored party of Moderns. Fellini brilliantly assembles what look like partygoers in an Antonioni film that has gone on too long—walking in a daze toward the beach as if to renew themselves. What they find is a monster that brings with it a sense of geological time, in which the brevity of human life is forcefully expressed; it is a memento mori from the depths of the ocean. The subtle interplay between the waves, which are real, and the sound of the wind, which is not, magnificently intertwines realism and archetypes into a seamless artistic reality.

The one moment in *La Dolce Vita* where we see Marcello working as a writer happens at the beach in an open cabana style restaurant. There is a jukebox playing contemporary pop music and there is a girl that looks to Marcello like "an angel in an Umbrian church". While cleaning (a running motif in Fellini's work: the woman that brings order and harmony) the girl expresses her modest aspirations to find a better job as a typist in Rome. Marcello looks sardonic and amused but also sympathetic. In a sense the "angel" wants to participate in the process of writing however modest—this modesty both distinguishes her from the other characters in the film and draws attention to Marcello's sense of entitlement divorced from any hard work. The empty restaurant radiant with "natural light", the sounds of the nearby beach, the pop music that suddenly starts and stops all convey an atmosphere of radiant health, (physical and psychic) of youth, of promise. It is the one moment where the film pauses as if to catch its breath as Marcello regards the profile of the "angel". The young girl is also at the beach at the end of the film separated from Marcello and his party by a shallow inlet. She seems to be invisible to all but Marcello; they make an attempt to communicate over the sound of the ocean but fail. Finally the girl uses her hands to signify "walking together". Marcello can't or won't understand her meaning—his body language suggests that he is exhausted and resigned—he doesn't cross the small body of water between them to reach her—he slumps to his knees and shrugs his shoulders—essentially throwing away that gift. The girl is associated with his talent, with his integrity, with the best part of him. His inability to communicate—the essential theme of the film—is also an inability to communicate with his own muse or his own voice. Fellini chooses one particularly banal moment one that Marcello might not



even remember in a few months: finding a girl on a beach and choosing not to go walking with her as the privileged moment where we see him throw his creative life away. His shrug says essentially "I don't have it in me to be a writer, but it doesn't matter, nothing does". Fellini is a moralist who understands that a choice is being made. That choice—in an almost moral/religious sense—is at the heart of Fellini's work. For Marcello at that moment all is lost—and his loss is not only personal but belongs to a whole post-war generation who sold their promise—as we see also in Antonioni's *La Notte*—for a place in the corporate technocracy that was then in the process of being formed. *La Dolce Vita* (a title Fellini always insisted was never meant ironically) ends with a close-up of the girl waving goodbye—to Marcello and then to us. The sound of wind and surf fill the soundtrack because they belong together with that image, as much as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* is linked to the ocean—and to fertility—so the "angel from an Umbrian church" is linked to the sea—and to renewal through faith. Her smile is forcefully innocent—asserting that innocence in a physical way as a rejoinder to Marcello's shrug. It is the yes to Marcello's no.

Fellini also pushes archetypes to the point at which they are in dialogue with each other as also happens in the films of the French New Wave—despite their obvious differences they have a playful self-reflexivity in common. Let's see when Fellini also "lays bare" the technique and the artifice: *And The Ship Sails On* ends with a sequence where we see how the various sets, includ-

ing the ship itself, have been built. We see the workers in overalls operating the hydraulics that control the machinery that creates the illusion of movement. We see behind the facades that are made of plywood and have nothing behind them but sand bags on the floor to keep them from toppling. We see artifice. Fellini shows us these devices not because he wishes to expose our foolishness (you thought the boat was real but you see it's all fake!) for the obvious reason that the theatrical aspect of these archetypes was clear from the beginning. We knew it was a fake—Fellini understands that we are able to suspend disbelief and critically see through our own suspension at the same time. Godard plays with our abilities in much the same way in *Un Femme Est Un Femme* where the characters slip into and out of the genre of the Hollywood musical while Godard uses various devices such as direct address to the audience, sudden shifts in lighting to highlight the artificiality of the form. In Godard and in Fellini's work the scenes in which we see the machinery of illusions is simply one more pleasure added to those already served, it is the dessert at the end of the meal.

In *Il Vitelloni* a very young Leopoldo is horrified when he is propositioned by an older "man of the theatre". The scene takes place by a provincial Italian beach. Fellini grew up in Rimini, an Italian town on the coast that he re-creates in various films—most spectacularly in *Amarcord*. The landscape in *Il Vitelloni* again acts as a counterpoint to Leopoldo's panic as he confronts sexual feelings that he cannot understand so he flees. His panic

believes his professional aspirations to be a playwright—that is to in some way understand the human condition—as he is not able to come to terms with his lack of experience, his fears and doubts. The ocean acts as a sounding board to the scene, suggesting the playing out of such scenarios throughout human history and gives a perspective that, for different reasons, the young man in a panic and the older man laughing, both lack. Leopoldo's dream of success in the theater crumbles away as he runs from the one person who can help him. The older man's laughter and the sound of the sea intermingle and follow Leopoldo back to his life as *Il Vitelloni*.

In *Amarcord* the townspeople who go out to meet the Ocean Liner "The Rex" as the sun sets—from the blind accordion player to the young woman searching for her "Gary Cooper"—like Leopoldo carry their dreams of fulfillment literally to the sea. The scene is shot in a studio and the ocean liner is a prop making us conscious throughout the proceedings that we are seeing something constructed. When "The Rex" finally makes an appearance it is night. The ocean liner is seen as a vast dark mass threatening and mysterious—theatrically lit and magnified out of all proportion by the scope of the aspirations of the townspeople on dinghies and small fishing boats. The cruise ship, essentially a luxury hotel with an engine that moves it across water, beautifully plays off the working skiffs and homemade boats that barely hold the dreamers in *Amarcord*. The vast gulf between classes has never been more beautifully expressed—certainly not by any Marxist works. The reason Fellini is so successful is that his primary interest is the emotional content of the scene rather than the ideological ramifications of it. The variety of individual responses to the sheer overabundant wealth of "The Rex" is something that he orchestrates beautifully creating a kind of chamber work for voices—working people and their aspirations—with the counterpoint being the vast funnel-like siren of "The Rex"—the sound of a triumphant machine. The two kinds of sounds intermingle with the sound of the water and the wind bringing the orchestration of sounds—the Wagnerian pomposity of "The Rex" and the Mozartian humor of the fishing boats towards the sublime. The ocean liner leaves a series of waves behind it causing the small boats to rock and bring the dreamers back to their reality: being in the ocean at night just outside of a small town to which they must return.

In *City of Women* the young woman strolling with feigned casualness to her cabana is obviously in an indoor set. The flat ocean behind her and the overly polished, highly composed theatrical props tell us that this ocean is not in a particular time or place—it is meant to stand in for all oceans and this woman is Woman standing in for all women throughout all times and all places, and the boys prowling around her are standing in for all boys who have just discovered their own sexual feelings as well as for all the myths associated with the awakening of sexuality. With archetypes the symbolic comes forward and the scene becomes immediately a metaphor. The characters, reduced to highly organized and symbolic *tableaux vivants*, become merely a part of the symbolic order being illustrated. That symbolic system becomes the central focus of the work rather than the emotional content of the narrative. Unfortunately archetypes more

often than not reduce complex realities to the simplicity of an essence—a concept—that organizes the world for us and reduces it to a cliché. Albeit the archetypes in Fellini's work are seen through the prism of early 20th century burlesque, with which Fellini grew up and to which he remained faithful throughout his career. The cultural weight of archetypes cannot be supported for long before becoming simply "the fantastic" or "the sublime" or "the grotesque". In short they become illustration—the image is bound to the Idea or the concept—and never comes to life—its poetics are flattened out as in advertising or conceptual art. In *City of Women* the metaphorical images congeal the moment they are projected and not even Fellini's sense of humor can save them.

Saraghina's dance on the beach in Fellini's *8 1/2* is awkward—really full of ridiculous gestures, embarrassing mannerisms—yet also beautiful, erotic and touching. The sea sparkles intensely behind her, refracting light as if we were seeing everything through a prism aimed directly at the sun. We see a woman—who is and is not "Woman"—weighed down by flesh, by matter, playing at being a Goddess. Again we are reminded of the *Birth of Venus* but now brought into a harsh unforgiving light that mocks the fantasy and reveals both its sordidness and its innocence. Only a child would fall for it—so she performs for children—and for us. The boys in tight constricting uniforms that make them look like little policemen with capes are the perfect foil for the barely dressed Saraghina. The fact that she is comfortable with her body—with her mortality—with the awkwardness of the erotic—that she takes pleasure in being in her own skin—that her attitude exudes (as with the "Umbrian Angel") psychic and physical well being makes her the enemy of the priests. This is because she has discovered that the creative links between imagination and erotic play lead not only to pleasure but to a communion with fellow humans that is essential. For the priests such an acceptance of fleeting mortal pleasures throws their very teleology into doubt. Saraghina is the Devil—the priest tell the children—and they mean it. They are the ones that pull Marcello down at the beginning of the film as he flies—falling to earth. The whole film might be that "fall" with a redemptive coda at the end of reconciliation and acceptance. In that wild dance on the beach Edra Gale—who plays Saraghina—and Fellini—tell us more about our self-delusions, our hopes, our mortal and moral limits than countless essays and philosophical tracts could ever accomplish. How we look when we dance and are pulled down by gravity (perhaps the defining essence of movement in film) has never been more beautifully expressed. On the soundtrack during the screen tests near the end of *8 1/2* we hear Fellini whispering: "Saraghina..." calling to her as when he was a boy. Fellini in effect returns the favor—sexual pleasure linked to imaginative play—that Saraghina once gave him. That sense of freedom linked to an eroticized imagination is a gift Fellini is able to give back to us—in the film *8 1/2*.

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The Romance of Certain Old Clothes

or They Don't Make 'em Like That Anymore

Honor de Cavallería and Art Cinema's Last Stand

ADAM BINGHAM

Nostalgia for a bygone era of filmmaking is something one usually associates with the paradigm of classical Hollywood: of a particular generation (or a particular breed of cinephile) fondly recalling the kind of stars, films, even genres that once proliferated in a mythically idealised cinematic past. In truth, such a demographic has in recent years been reasonably well catered for. Films like Todd Haynes' Sirkean melodrama *Far From Heaven* [2002], the Doris Day/Rock Hudson romantic comedy trappings of *Down With Love* [2003], Steven Soderbergh's *Casablanca*-inspired *The Good German* [2006] and more recently George Clooney's screwball pastiche *Leatherheads* [2008] have all immersed themselves completely and surprisingly unselfconsciously in antiquated worlds of the silver screen's golden yesterday. Even those audiences hungry for more demanding fare, whose tastes only recede back as far as the movie brats and the European-inflected American genre worlds of Scorsese, Coppola, Malick and Cimino, have had the likes of *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* [2007], Spielberg's *Munich* [2005] and (Clooney again) *Michael Clayton* [2007] to at least whet their doubtless prodigious appetites.

Concomitantly, films from all over the world have in the last ten or so years begun more and more to cannibalise cinematic history, to draw inspiration from outstanding progenitors who themselves belong to a famed and idealised era of filmmaking: in this case, the first generation of art cinema directors from the 1950s and 60s. We have had China's extraordinary sixth generation raiding De Sica and Bresson in, respectively, Wang



Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon



Xiaoshuai's *Shiqi sui de dan che* (*Beijing Bicycle*, 2001) and Jia Zhang-ke's first film *Xiao wu* (*Pickpocket*, 1997). Staying in Asia, there is the example of Hou Hsiao-hsien. His *Kôhi jikô* (*Café Lumière*, 2003) was made in memory and in celebration of Ozu Yasujiro, a director who further inspired Abbas Kiarostami's magnificent philosophical treatise on cinematic time, space and narrative, *Five* (a.k.a. *Five Long Takes Live Dedicated to Yasujiro Ozu*) [2004]. Ozu also found favour again in 1990s Japanese cinema, with directors such as Kore-eda Hirokazu and Ichikawa Jun explicitly drawing on his body of work, in particular his detached, contemplative visual style and thematic focus on modern life and the Japanese family unit.

In Europe, we have Christophe Honoré's film *Les Chansons d'amour* (*Love Songs*, 2007), which borrows freely and unapologetically from Jacques Demy, especially *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, 1964). Also from France there is François Ozon's Fassbinder-derived *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* (*Water Drops on Burning Rocks*, 2000), which was adapted from a play from the New German Cinema maestro and in which Ozon kept the fettered, verbose theatricality and sexual role-playing of his early films very much to the fore (not to mention lifting wholesale the transsexual protagonist of *In einem Jahr mit Dreizehn Monden/In A Year with Thirteen Moons* [1978]). Similarly, the Polish absurdist fable *Duze Zwierze* (*The Big Animal*, 2000), from a scenario by Kieslowski, is predicated on an updating of Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar* [1966]. In this unassuming film, Bresson's titular donkey becomes a camel abandoned by a circus troupe in a small country village. He has one minder, rather than a series of caretakers whose self-interest he bears stubborn witness to, but is similarly placed at the heart of an inquiry into human inequity, greed and a need for tolerance. Finally, from Mexico, there is Carlos Reygadas' *Stellet Licht* (*Silent Light*, 2007), which quotes (or steals, depending on your view of the film) the dénouement from Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet* (*The Word*, 1955).

One may also point here to broader examples of the appropriation of particular national cinematic movements and styles closely allied to the birth of art cinema. Christophe Honoré, Bernardo Bertolucci and Philippe Garrel's Nouvelle Vague reveries figure prominently in this regard: respectively, *Dans Paris* [2005], *The Dreamers* [2003] and *Les Amants réguliers* (*Regular Lovers*, 2005). As does the Argentinean Pablo Trapero's explicitly neo-realist first film *Mundo grúa* (*Crane World*, 1999). Moreover, there is the work of Aleksandr Sokurov, whose own documentary about his idol Andreï Tarkovsky, *Moskovskaya elegiya* (*Moscow Elegy*, 1987), can stand as a vivid testament to the pervasive influence of his legendary fellow countryman (see in particular Sokurov's *Mat I Syn/Mother and Son* [1997]).

Of course, intertextuality and self-reflexivity were staples of art cinema as it initially developed and flowered in Europe, especially in France. However, while the aforementioned Hollywood examples tend to lose themselves in their excavations of a cinematic past, the above re-workings of art cinema's early luminaries present a counter example. They make overt references to

famous art cinema films and filmmakers, but by and large they reject an attendant textual alterity: that is, in refuting the approach of their US contemporaries, they equally refuse many of the same markers of (art) cinematic modernity as distinguished their forebears. With the partial exceptions of Honoré and Bertolucci, there is neither the filmic quotation marks nor the same narrative and generic diffusion found in early Godard and Truffaut. Nor (with the qualified exception of Hou) does one find the psychological and expressionistic de-dramatizations of Antonioni or of Wenders, the severe stylistic and narrational ruptures and theatricality of, say, the Japanese New Wave (especially Oshima Nagisa and Yoshishige Yoshida) or Jacques Rivette, the convergence of fiction and documentary modes associated with Rossellini, Herzog or Imamura, or the austere, existential soul searching of a Bergman or a Dreyer.

In tandem with, and helping to create, this new global cinema is the fact that increased patterns of trans-national cinematic consumption and circulation have destabilised much of the oppositional specificity that animated the early decades of art cinema, as well as discourses on the subject such as David Bordwell's *The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice* [1979] (which was expanded into his chapter on art cinema in *Narration in the Fiction Film* [1985]) or Steve Neale's seminal Screen feature *Art Cinema as Institution* [1981]. The success of recent foreign language films in the West, particularly Ang Lee's *Wo hu cang long* (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 2000) or Zhang Yimou's *Yingxiong* (*Hero*, 2002), coupled with Martin Scorsese or Quentin Tarantino 'presenting' the latest film by Park Chan-wook, Miike Takashi or Kitano Takeshi, is apt to at least increase the visibility and familiarity of international, foreign-language cinema (although the fact that Lee and Zhang's films are reasonably generic, mainstream products within their own country must be taken into account as undermining any totalising attempt to theorize their art cinematic status).

Similarly, there has been a progressive undermining of the one-time *locus classicus* of art cinema exhibition—the film festival. Each year (especially in Cannes) more and more Hollywood films receive their worldwide premieres and play in competition at the major festivals, with US stars and directors frequently appearing to promote their product. Moreover, since the days of the movie brats in the 1970s, many of the aforementioned formal characteristics of art cinema have been appropriated by American directors (although Bordwell would doubtless prefer the term assimilation¹). And this has gone hand-in-hand with Hollywood's co-option of such high-art signifiers as the auteur theory, so that now its naturalized, commercial function is as the institutional marker of promised product, much as genres used to function in the classical era. Indeed, any first time director or competent journeyman can now receive his or her 'a film by' or 'a...film' credit, especially if this helps to sell the new work they have to offer (from the director of....).

All of which has led to a certain blurring of the boundaries between Hollywood and its 'other', in which directors such as Jia, Hou, Ozon and Reygadas signal a decisive paradigm shift in

contemporary world cinema. In the wake of the deaths of Bergman and Antonioni within a week of one another last year, Peter Mathews was moved to write (in *Sight and Sound*) that art cinema as representative of a serious, personal cinema of the anguished soul was now dead, and that the like would not be seen again¹. This may be a gross overreaction and overstatement, but such a perception can perhaps be fostered with regard to the above filmmakers with regard to the significant reshaping of the space in which discourse on their work proliferates. This has now been reconfigured to include at least an equal emphasis on English-language cinema, something especially true in England. Where European directors were once snobbishly privileged over their indigenous or US counterparts, now a magazine such as *Sight and Sound* reviews every new film released theatrically and contains as least as many features on English language cinema as on foreign, international cinema.

Furthermore, filmmakers such as David Lynch, Mike Figgis, Terence Malick and Steven Soderbergh often attempt to approximate the stylistic and narrative tropes of European art cinema (Soderbergh even imported Godardian visual mannerisms into his commercial sequel *Ocean's Twelve* [2004]). At the same time, notable directors such as Olivier Assayas (with his most recent film *Boarding Gate* [2007]), Ozon (with *Angel* [2006]), Fyodor Bondarchuk (*9 Rota/9th Company* [2005]), Feng Xiaogang (*Ji jie hao/Assembly* [2007]) and Kang je-gyu (*Taegukgi hwinalrimyeo/Brotherhood* [2004]) appear to desire a return to Fassbinder's dream of a Hollywood away from Hollywood, directing lavish, star-driven genre films that are almost indistinguishable from their US counterparts. I would also point to those foreign filmmakers that have worked on mainstream American products: names like Ang Lee, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, Luc Besson, Tom Tykwer, Nakata Hideo and Shimizu Takashi, to say nothing of the 1990s influx of Hong Kong directors into US action cinema or the recent US migration of almost all the prominent new Mexican cinema directors. This level of cross-fertilization has significantly transformed some of the notions of what we think of as art and popular cinema. Can one, in fact, now talk of Hollywood art cinema? What, for instance, of a film such as Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* [2004] or Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* [2006]? Or the work of David Lynch, whose use of stars and American generic paradigms has long gone hand in hand with his surrealism and appropriation of European psychodrama (is not his *Mulholland Drive* [2001] simply *Persona* [1966] remade as a dark Hollywood satire). Conversely, in a more popular, accessibly mainstream lexicon, consider a film such as Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* [2006]. What struck me watching this was that here, surely, is a sci-fi/action film as Theo Angelopoulos or Béla Tarr would have designed and executed it. Even ignorant of these filmmakers, as a vast majority of this film's audience would doubtless be (ignorant, too, of aspects of film history and style) would not these viewers (however instinctively) grasp or intuit the difference engendered by the technically stunning sequence shots Cuarón employs to realize his set-pieces and their fundamental opposition to the frenetic-to-a-fault cutting of

much contemporary action cinema (Michael Bay, Tony Scott, et al.)? Does this not represent at least the tentative beginnings of a mainstream lexicon wherein (as a Hollywood art film would be defined) the very signifiers of modern high-concept genre filmmaking are significantly transformed, if not transgressed? I wouldn't go so far as to argue that the overall effect is comparable to the formal strategies of canonical art cinema, but at least here we are seeing the implementation of alternative techniques that are going some way toward re-classifying a cinematic practice in which a one-time mutual exclusivity was prevalent.

Art cinema in its early years also carried with it an intrinsic stamp of national specificity. Most obviously, this was located in various movements or other perceived collectives associated with different countries (Italian neo-realism, the French New Wave, New German Cinema, etc.) and localized within their particular socio-historical determinants. It could also accommodate constructions of national filmmaking in which the indigenous industry has naturalized and legitimated art as opposed to populist cinema, an example of which would be Spain, in which serious auteur filmmakers from Buñuel, Bardem and Saura to Almodóvar and Medem have continued to work at the centre of their country's industry rather than as a peripheral elite. However, in the years since the New Taiwanese Cinema of the 1980s and '90s, when a moribund indigenous commercial industry was explicitly counteracted with films in which the textual codifications of art cinema were allied to a new national historicity (something that remains unique amongst new wave cinemas), it has become ever more difficult to conceive of stable, knowable national cinematic identities, and increasingly problematic to discourse on national styles as one once could when their horizons were almost exclusively defined by outstanding auteur names. Now, such national collectives as one can discern—say, the Japanese new new wave (Kitano, Aoyama Shinji, Shinozaki Makoto, Iwai Shunji, Sabu)—are distinctly transnational entities. One of the key producers of 1990s Japanese cinema, Sento Takenori, who has been involved in the new wave and independent cinema in Japan, has even said that he doesn't feel like he is making Japanese movies and that he wants to implement Western production methods and place an emphasis on success at festivals and in foreign distribution: "Most Japanese producers think of the domestic market first...I'm differentⁱⁱⁱ". Indeed, the aforementioned new group of young filmmakers has been referred to as the "Japanese film after Mr. Pink" generation for the pervasive influence of Tarantino over and above any tangible Japanese inspiration.

Today, as more and more films become available, one's idea of national filmmaking has to contend with a much broader range of determinants. To this end, Chris Berry and Mary Farquharⁱⁱⁱ have drawn on social commentators such as Benedict Anderson, Ann Anagnost and Judith Butler to explore the ways in which modern conceptions of nationality and attendant constructions of citizenry, identity and individual subjectivity become "impossible unities^{iv}". In our contemporary age, the subject is perennially produced, narrated into being, rather than

existing as a given or constant. Relating this to the study of cinematic nationality, Berry and Farquhar note: "There is growing awareness of the dependence of nationally based film industries upon export markets, international co-production practices, and the likelihood that national audiences draw upon foreign films in the process of constructing their own national identity".

Further complicating matters is the fact that several directors have, in recent years, been accused of pandering to foreign tastes and perceptions in constructing what one may term performative national style and identity, that is, specifically packaged and engineered pictures of overt nationality intended as much for international as for domestic consumption. Zhang Yimou's recent historical martial arts trilogy, Kitano Takeshi's *Dŭruzu* (Dolls, 2003) or Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amelie* [2001] (following on from several works of the 1980s *Cinema du look* trend of French cinema) could be seen to wallow in a picturesque 'empire of signs': a parade of clichéd images of national space and history designed for the touristic gaze of 'others'. This is not unique to contemporary cinema (after Kurosawa's *Rashōmon* had opened Western eyes to Japanese cinema in 1951, Mizoguchi produced several films with one eye on the international market, and the other on festival distribution and success), but it has become far more marked a phenomenon, and cannot be ignored.

This is not to suggest that all borders between mainstream (American) filmmaking and art cinema have been breached. Commentators like Tom Ryall (as long ago as 1981) have forwarded conceptions of the latter in which textual distinctions and differentiations are significantly downplayed in favour of other determinants:

It may be the case, in fact, that the fundamental unifying feature of the 'art' film genre is this special circulatory network that serves to confirm the distinction between its minority audience and the mass audience of the mainstream cinema.^{vi}

This seems to me as valid a perception today as it was in 1981, even if one would have to append the caveat pertaining to foreign genre films versus art cinema texts proper. Moreover, if, as Steve Neale's *Art Cinema as Institution* implies, "the presence of art is defined...as the absence of Hollywood^{vii}", it is perhaps the case now that such an opposition can be marked out more clearly in terms of subject matter rather than of formal characteristics. If one could imagine the style of, say, Reygadas' *Japón* [2002] or Battala en el cielo (*Battle in Heaven*, 2005), Kiarostami's *Five* (essentially comprised of sequence shots) or Pablo Trapero's subtly expressionistic *Nacido y Criado* (*Born and Bred*, 2006) in the work of a Mike Figgis, David Gordon Green or especially Gus Van Sant, then their respectively extreme, experimental and minimal subjects one would imagine to be less easily applicable.

Thus, along with a current climate that one may reasonably term post-art cinema, I would argue we could even talk of post-nationality in cinema. Given this situation, films such as those

outlined above can be seen to negotiate far more problematic parameters of a new global cinema that de-stabilizes any mutual-exclusivity between popular and artistic filmmaking, or between national and international paradigms defined against one another. The work of new world cinema directors is not the total and all-consuming immersion in a forebear's romantic old clothes that one finds in Hollywood excavations of past glories (replete as they are with an attendant employment of classical style), nor the defiantly oppositional texts of the first wave of European art cinema. Rather, they have picked over their inspirations for material relevant to themselves as directors of a particular nationality at a particular time, and work within an idiom that acknowledges both the above models of filmmaking and their increasing cross-fertilization and international consumption. Ultimately, rather than any constricting binary rhetoric, they conceive of their work in figuratively piecemeal terms, within which aspects of style or national specificity automatically evoke their other or mirror image, and identity (for the filmmakers and their characters) becomes a process of reconciliation.

Nowhere is this clearer than the case of *Beijing Bicycle* and *Pickpocket* and their respective directors. The inspirations for both are films centrally concerned with crime and punishment, which the Chinese directors are able to locate in purely sociological terms in narratives of disaffected youth that pertain to a rapidly changing, modernizing China (a new, youthful China) and its attendant identity crisis. To this end, the bicycle is as important a symbol for Xiaoshuai and contemporary China as it was for De Sica and post-war Italy. It denotes the primary means of transport for the masses, and becomes a potent image of what is lost in the country's drive to economic prosperity. For Jia, who I think it is fair to suggest has gone on to become his generation's most incisive chronicler of China's contemporary transformation, the life and actions of his petty thief preclude Bresson's spiritual thesis on human imprisonment, judgement and contact. Rather (in a way inconceivable in Bresson, who was always the most hermetic of filmmakers), he becomes a microcosm of the country in which he lives, a sorry figure left behind by the prostitute he has fallen in love with and by his friend and one-time associate who has prospered in business. This duality in the film's discourse on money and the transfer of money then becomes emblematic of financial legitimacy and success and an attendant leaving behind of one's roots, one's past.

Honouring the Knights

All of which brings me finally to a film that works against this prevailing trend: which hearkens back to an era of art cinema gone by, and combines both the aforementioned trends in contemporary US and world cinema. Albert Serra's *Honor de Cavalleria* (*Honour of the Knights*, 2006), a minimalist, ruminative 'adaptation' of a small number of episodes from Cervantes' famous tome, is a European film that dresses itself up as thoroughly as its contemporaries in Hollywood, whilst at the same time explicitly referencing a number of pre-eminent directors from the first wave of European art cinema. So much so that that

the review in *Time Out* in the UK explicitly questioned whether or not the film had any identity of its own in the wake of the time it spends paying homage to others^{viii}. This combination gives the film an ineluctable air of seeming antiquated, out of place. It is a film that, away from the American context of pastiche and simile (which, in an age of countless sequels, remakes and adaptations, surely naturalizes the appropriation of past idioms of filmmaking far more than in any other industry), seems like a cinematic relic, a time capsule that was buried forty or fifty years ago for future generations to exhume, pore over and marvel at.

Even before one considers the film's style, *Honor de Cavallería* emerges as an archetypical art cinema text. From the point of view of exhibition practices, it certainly conforms to Ryall's definition of an art cinematic institutional network of circulation. In 2006 and 2007 it graced a number of festivals, garnered positive critical notices, but has been denied theatrical distribution and (in my experience) has not fared well with audiences. It played at Cannes in 2006, during the director's fortnight, and gained a small but enthusiastic support amongst critics. Indeed, in 2007 it was named by *Cahiers du cinema* as the seventh best film of the year. I first saw it in March of last year at a Spanish and Latin American Film Festival in the UK. The theatre was small, but densely packed, no doubt in anticipation of another crowd pleaser along the lines of Álex de la Iglesia's *Crimen Ferpecto* (*Perfect Crime*, 2004) or Fabián Bielinsky's *El Aura* (*The Aura*, 2005), both of which had already premiered during the festival. However, those few audience members who remained when the film ended were distinctly unimpressed, with a number loudly venting their derision and displeasure.

That Cervantes' famed tome is ripe for the kind of artistic, experimental reading offered by Serra is amply signalled by its already having been the influence for a multitude of different works across a variety of art forms. In addition to the many ballets, there have been a Broadway musical, a Richard Strauss concerto, a George Telemann orchestral suite, and an Anton Rubinstein opus (87). *Don Quixote* has also inspired a novel by Graham Greene, *Monsignor Quixote*, in which the knight errant and his faithful squire become a catholic priest and a deposed communist mayor debating their relative faiths and beliefs on a car journey across Spain. There is also the myriad of films, each of which takes a different approach to adapting the novel and uses it as a point of departure in drawing out contrasting thematic concerns. The fact that the novel inspired and ultimately defeated such visionary directors as Orson Welles and Terry Gilliam is testament to both its grandeur and complexity, and its suitability to being picked over by distinctive artistic sensibilities. Chief amongst the completed versions of the book is the 1957 adaptation by the Russian director Grigory Kozintsev. Made just before his superlative adaptations of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, his is a typically intelligent reading of the text. On the one hand, it functions perfectly as a sprightly and nimble adventure narrative, with a perfectly judged Nikolai Cherkasov in the lead, a delight in the poetic vicissitudes of language (ably supported by

a muted theatricality of *mise-en-scène*) and intelligent narrativization of diegetic audiences, commentators and narrators to highlight Cervantes' play on perception, reality, fantasy and the subjective experience. On the other hand, however, Kozintsev and writer Yevgeny Shvarts pre-suppose a familiarity with Cervantes in order to turn the text against itself. So that the film begins *in medias res* with the scene of Don's family discussing his apparent madness after disposing of his beloved books. And what is doubtless the novel's most famous, celebrated incident, the windmill scene (so much so that it has entered common parlance as connotative of delusional states), is abstracted from its place in Book 1 of the novel. Instead, it appears immediately prior to the final scene of the Don's adventures, in which the Bachelor of Arts Sansón Carrasco/Georgi Vitsin fights Quixote under an assumed name, and, thus vanquishing him, makes the weary traveller return home and give up his quest (again this incident occurs in a different place than in the book). It is chiefly the exertion caused by attempting to subdue the windmills (in the belief that they are dragons) that allows Carrasco to win out over Don Quixote so easily. Therefore, what is, on the page, a comically endearing introduction to the protagonist's romantic self-delusion becomes a prime reason in the film for the termination of his quest and a contributory factor in his death. It is also the case that, as Vladimir Nabokov stresses in his *Lectures on Don Quixote*^{ix}, Carrasco (whose ambiguities in the novel are ironed out by Kozintsev) functions as the Knight-errant's mirror image, his shadow, and thus Don Quixote is in effect defeated by himself in this film. It is the death of the knight before the death of the man, and the proximity of this scene to the denouement (they are much further apart in the novel) that serves to underline and stress the incompatibility of this duality in clearer, starker tones than in the novel².

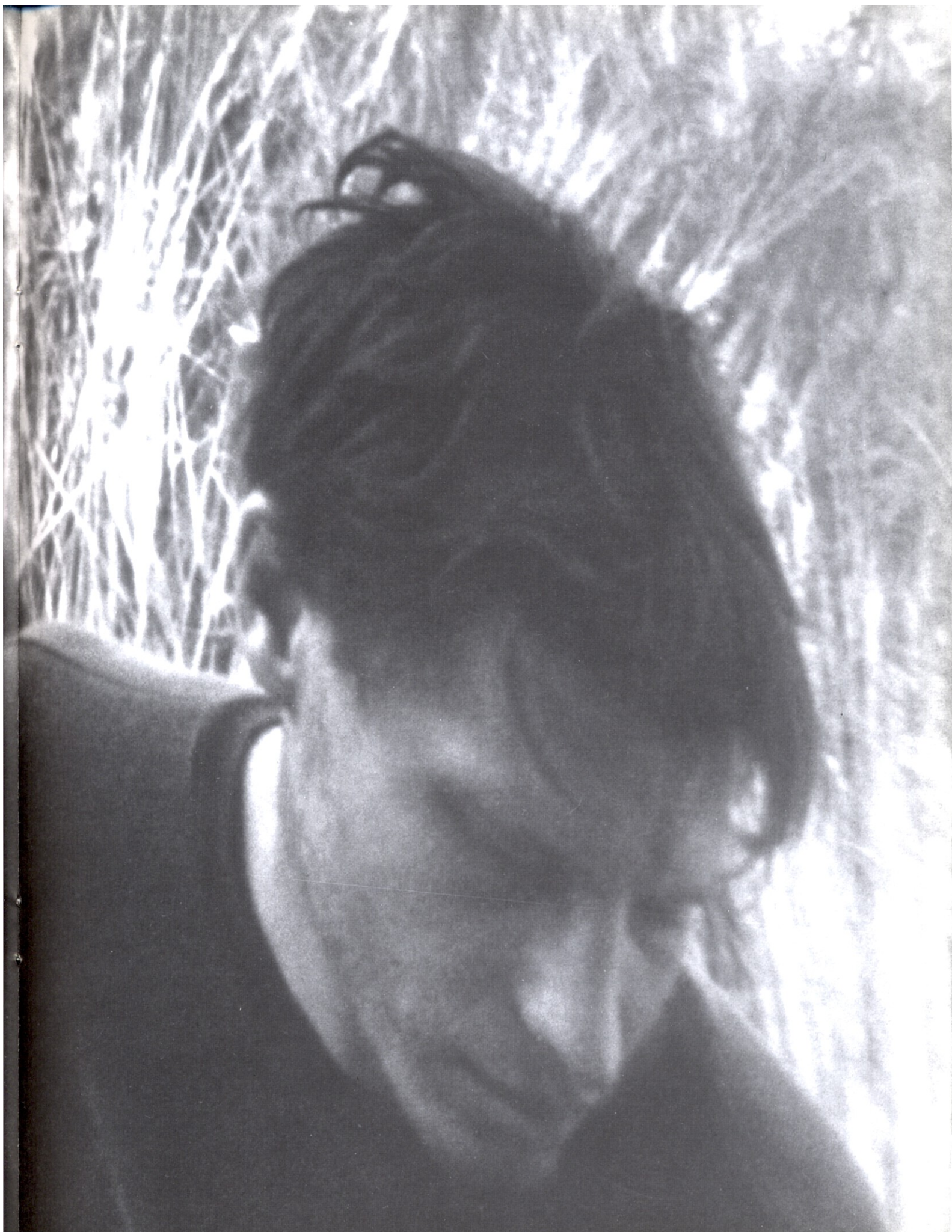
In Spain, there was also a film version of the novel that pre-figured Serra's by only four years. *El Caballero Don Quijote* (*Don Quixote, Knight Errant*, 2002), by the respected director Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, is an adaptation of the second volume (1614) of Cervantes' novel (Aragón had previously adapted the first part as a television mini-series in 1991). It has what Leslie Camhi in the *Village Voice* described as 'a playful, postmodern sensibility'^x, particularly in its development of the storyline in which Sansón Carrasco presents the narrativized literary exploits of Quixote himself, and the Don finds he has a horde of imitators in the same vein as he himself once imitated famed exploits of the page. However, unlike Kozintsev's film, there is little to tease out any overall thematic glue, any real depth or perspective that would bridge or contrast the otherwise more or less discreet episodes of the waywardly piecemeal structure.

Waiting for God...oh!

Back, then, to *Honor de Cavallería*. Serra's approach to this, his first film, may best be described as Cervantes by way of Samuel Beckett as filtered through the cinematic idiom of early Pasolini, Bresson, Pialat or Antonioni. Its approach both to Cervantes and to cinematic representation and signification is in fact slyly, self-



Mother and Son



reflexively, surmised in the first scene, in the first dialogue spoken by Don Quixote/Lluís Carbó to Sancho/ Lluís Serrat. The former asks (with regard to his armour): 'Is it fixed yet?' To which Sancho replies 'it's fixed'. Whereupon Quixote questions his squire further by saying: 'really? I didn't see you do anything'. Which is perfectly true. Don Quixote didn't see Sancho do anything. Neither did we. And neither will we see him or the Don do anything throughout the whole of the film. Because they will not do anything throughout the whole of the film: that is, other than walking, talking (chiefly about God), resting, bathing, and other such quotidian functionalities one would not expect to see making up an entire film narrative, particularly in an adaptation of a novel as incident-packed as Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. There is not even the de-contextualised, de-narrativized violence as pure spectacle with which Bresson begins *Lancelot du lac* (*Lancelot of the Lake*, 1974); nor indeed the implied but elided battle that closes this same film. We simply have two men in a landscape, the narration never diverging from a naturalistic, contemplative idiom that facilitates only reflection on the part of the viewer. Serra rejects the devices of continuity editing and other stylistic norms as rigorously as he eschews any dramatic import in the narrative: no POV shots or other subjective identification techniques, no analytical decoupage, a Bressonian 'automatism'^{xii} of 'model'^{xiii} and performance, and only one instance of non-diegetic music (a sparse, melancholy guitar lilt), in a scene towards the end in which Don Quixote and Sancho stand beneath a tree staring upwards at the heavens (to which I shall return).

There are one or two moments in the film that threaten to change or upset this register. In particular there is a scene in which Don Quixote wanders away by himself during a strong wind. The sight of the old man apparently readying himself for a confrontation (he has Sancho put on his armour for him), coupled with this particular surge of weather, may well alert those who know the book to the impending battle with the windmills. But this scene never materialises. Quixote does nothing save for walk purposefully into the wind and stare intently off-screen as he will do innumerable times throughout the film. There is even a shot of him in full battle-dress, with his helmet on and visor down, but it is a comic moment in which he is standing in an awkward, static pose and seemingly hemmed in to the far left of the frame as though in mockery of his heroic pretensions. Finally, after cutting away to a bored Sancho, the scene ends as ignominiously and uneventfully as it had begun, and we are taken back to the pair's uneventful, prosaic travels.

Similarly, towards the end of the film, a number of men on horseback suddenly appear and take Don Quixote away with them. However, it is an incident that seems barely to register with Sancho. He continues to behave in the same reserved, apprehensive, apparently tired and frustrated manner as he has throughout, and busies himself merely chopping at grass until, as suddenly as he had been taken, his master reappears. The time span of their separation remains impossible to determine, and even the reunion itself is elided: Serra merely cuts to the two

travelling once again, for all intents and purposes as though nothing had happened.

There is also one pointed moment, a single edit at the close of the film's first extended scene, which appears to contravene Serra's otherwise steadfast refusal of the tenets of classical editing. Following a brief stint of walking, the pair stop and Don Quixote beseeches Sancho to observe a beautiful sunrise. After a long-held medium shot of Quixote looking at this view (Sancho barely registers it and begins to walk away), there is a straight cut to a landscape that does indeed show a picturesque sunrise over a deep green valley, in what appears to be an optical point of view shot from Quixote's perspective. That is, until Quixote and Sancho amble into frame in long shot, and we are pulled out of the film's universe and asked to consider and reflect upon it rather than partake in or engage with its story. In addition to its manipulation and subversion of film syntax, this edit further entails a spatial discontinuity, since the initial shot of Don Quixote looking at the sunrise shows himself and Sancho preparing to turn and exit screen right just behind them, as though walking away from the sunrise. When they then appear in the next shot, however, they enter screen right before beginning to cross the frame, immediately undermining one's conception of what exactly one was looking at. It is an important moment, as it is by this route that Serra establishes and facilitates a cognitive approach to spectatorship: thinking about and contemplating the film rather than simply losing oneself in it, in a simple identification with the characters and being held in rapture, suspense, expectation and excitement over the development and outcome of the plot. This is crucial to the effect of the film because, as I will subsequently argue, it is a process mirrored within the text by the characters themselves, a formal aspect of canonical art cinema that becomes a narrativized subject.

Of the four cinematic names I previously offered (I will return to Beckett in due course), the first two (Pasolini and Bresson) loom the largest. The influence of Antonioni is the most tenuous, chiefly residing in *Honor de Cavallería's* entirely de-dramatized narrative (a trait one doesn't associate with the other directors), and its picture of ultimately lost souls adrift in a landscape over which they presume to dominate but which finally appears almost to consume them. Although even here Serra operates on a different plane: he is markedly more minimalist on the first point, presenting far fewer dramatically varied scenes and with an ostensibly repetitive repertoire; whilst on the latter he works within a much less stylized and expressionistic register. One may also add that his milieu (the Castilian plains of Spain, so loaded and rich a cinematic locale) is resolutely rural and connotatively timeless whereas Antonioni's tended to the urban, and to specific, localized contemporaneity. Serra's is a naturalistic approach, and it is precisely this naturalism, whose lineage in French cinema is particularly conspicuous, which leads me to Pialat. Again the link is far from all-encompassing; residing as it by and large does in one comparable text: the *Palme d'or* winning *Sous le soleil de Satan* (*Under Satan's Sun*, 1987). This film's emphatic

stress on surface verisimilitude, on the phenomenological veracity of the narrated, pro-filmic event, begins subtly to rupture along with the protagonist's faith (a priest confronting self-doubt, sin and the temptation of apparent evil). Like Pasolini in *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to St. Mathew*, 1964) and Bresson in *Lancelot du lac* (and, for that matter, like Eric Rohmer in *Perceval le Gallois/Perceval* [1978], another film on the Quixotic romantic rapture of being a knight), Pialat simplifies, de-familiarizes and renders immediate the spectacular and the mythicized. In *Under Satan's Sun*, as in *The Gospel According to St. Mathew*, an apparent meeting with the devil takes the simple form of a dialogue of faith and belief between two men. This then becomes (in a direct manipulation of two of the outstanding tenets of art cinema: the stress placed on objective and subjective reality³) the site for a battle largely localized and internalized within one man, the central character of the priest whose spiritual crisis is rendered entirely in the physical realm.

Many of these traits, and especially the method of what Paul Schrader famously characterised as 'transcendental style', are also, of course, Bresson's: supremely, they are Bresson's. He is a filmmaker with a perceptible influence on recent generations of directors (aside from Jia Zhang-ke one could point to Bruno Dumont, Chantal Akerman, Pedro Costa, Michael Haneke, Joachim Lafosse and the Romanian Cristian Mungiu), and so it is with Albert Serra. The spiritual dimension of Bresson's work always arises from detailed depictions of the quotidian; from representing in full—often (as Michael Haneke would do in his early films) in isolating close-ups—the physical labour inherent in a majority of his protagonist's lives and struggles. It is a cinema of the minute, ordinary, repetitive detail, and this naturally gave rise to a concomitant emphasis on close-ups of the human face. Indeed, one way of understanding Bresson's, and indeed Pasolini's, styles, is to consider them a cinema of faces. Both directors had a predilection for the specific, representative visage, almost always one of a non-actor who would be carefully chosen and whose face would then be composed so as to carry a significant portion of the film's meaning. However, there is a divergence of usage and emphasis here. Whereas Pasolini was generally interested in the exterior, in a social 'type' that his Marxist imagination could employ to populate both his early, searing explorations of grinding proletarian struggle and marginalisation and his later, carnivalesque medieval romps, Bresson desired a route to an interior life. As he says in *Notes on the Cinematographer*, he liked to choose his models by ear, by talking to them on the telephone rather than in person^{xiii}. This was because their and their character's trajectories in his work would be 'from the exterior to the interior...(as) the thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me'^{xiv}. The effect, ultimately, is what David Thomson terms 'reserved faces (that) evoke all the wildest emotions of the spirit'^{xv}.

Honor de Cavalleria is itself a film about faces, and about the contemplation of faces on our part as viewers, an act highlighted by David Bordwell as characteristic of art cinema:

Concerned less with action than reaction, the art cinema presents psychological effects in search of their causes... (it) developed a range of *mise-en-scène* cues for expressing character mood: static postures, covert glances, smiles that fade, aimless walks, emotion-filled landscapes, and associated objects.^{xvi}

However, Serra's film takes this to another level entirely, so that it could be said to be about contemplation itself, about the process of looking and what exactly is attendant upon this act, how the gaze can transform the world. *Honor de Cavalleria* is replete with shots of Don Quixote (often in close-up but sporadically in medium shot) simply staring out at the landscape around him, stilled in quietude and reflection, his eyes frequently darting to indicate a mental process taking place but the fundamental blankness of his aged countenance left undisturbed, essentially unresponsive. In parallel, the preclusion of classical decoupage, the lack of any corresponding point of view shots, means we must watch him watching, look at him looking. We are configured as objects of a gaze that is itself only an object. Any corresponding subjectivity is denied. Thus does the film begin to narrativize the process of looking, the act of contemplation that the (attentive and sympathetic) audience is engaged in: it is a contemplation of a contemplation of the world.

There are no point of view shots, no optical representations of what Don Quixote is seeing, because what he is really seeing cannot be seen, cannot be depicted on film. It is here that the suitability of Cervantes' novel to this kind of art cinema treatment is further reinforced, given the titular protagonist's status as a man who continually looks at the world and sees what is not there. The Don Quixote of Serra's film, like his counterpart on the page, sees beyond the physical world, he just sees something different from giants and dragons. It is a 'wild emotion of the spirit', and it is alluded to and inferred in two ways. Most obviously there is the dialogue (or, more properly, monologue, as Sancho barely speaks at all throughout), in which Don Quixote discourses on the glory of God; that it is God who has provided for them and set the path that Don Quixote will tread and which Sancho must follow: 'even', Don Quixote adds, 'if you don't understand it'. More important, though, is the imagery, the attention paid to the specificity of light and the attendant feelings this engenders at different times of the day. This becomes a Bressonian phenomenological reality that begins to become connotative. Like Pedro Costa's stylistically comparable (and similarly divisive) *Juventude Em Marcha* (*Colossal Youth*, 2006), *Honor de Cavalleria* was shot on a PD150 digital camera that, as one reviewer of the film has noted, 'seems effortlessly to produce miracles with natural light'^{xvii}. However, unlike Don Quixote himself, Serra does not simply stand back and admire the beauty of the natural world. The opening scene of the film lays out its expressive, art cinematic use of naturalistic *mise-en-scène* that enunciates for the characters (in another echo of Pialat's *Under Satan's Sun*), as Don Quixote and Sancho idle in

the grass, with the latter performing some perfunctory tasks that his master has demanded of him. Over the course of little more than 15 minutes, we see the light change as time almost imperceptibly progresses from daylight through the magic hour and dusk and, finally, into darkness, when the figures of Quixote and Sancho are barely discernible (such scenes as these set in the pure blackness of night sporadically punctuate the film in a further reinforcement of two different narrative worlds). The subtle connotation here, confirmed when the enigmatic final shot of Sancho and several men carrying Quixote in a wooden cage suddenly takes place in darkness, is that the particular emotional and physical trajectory of the film will be as day turning into night. That is, there is a gradual darkening as Don Quixote's increasing sense of mortality and his movement towards death incrementally take hold and develop. It is something that is further heightened in contrast with much of the rest of the film, which was shot during the magic hour, the brief time of sunrise and sunset when night becomes day and vice versa. This is not so as to implement a Terence Malick or Werner Herzog-like mode of natural lyricism, but simply to make tangible the sense with this particular time of day of being in-between time—a fleeting, interstitial moment that is neither day nor night but is clearly in the process 'of becoming', of moving from one state to another.

In this way does physical time in the film become transfigured as psychological time. And in contradistinction to the line spoken by Sancho in the play and film *Man of La Mancha* ('My eye did not make this world, it only sees it'), the natural world does indeed become transformed under the gaze of the famous dreamer Don Quixote. This then serves to open up and thematize the proliferation of other such dualities of style and structure throughout the film, chief in which regard is the related conception of a psychological space that predominates over the physical world. In stripping away all the adventure narrative trappings and surfeit of dramatic incident from the novel, leaving only two men in a series of landscapes, Serra underlines a distinct simile of traditional art cinema in his film: the proliferation of European narratives built around primarily two central characters journeying together across a particular country, often in narratives that privilege what Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has referred to as art cinema's 'dead time'^{xviii}. One could point here to Fellini's *La strada* [1954], Bergman's *Det Sjunde inseglet* (*The Seventh Seal*, 1957), Antonioni's *L'Avventura* [1960], Pasolini's *Uccellacci e uccellini* (*Hawks and Sparrows*, 1966), Wenders' *Alice in den Städten* (*Alice in the Cities*, 1974) and *Im Lauf Der Zeit* (*Kings of the Road*, 1975). Serra takes this precept to a greater extreme, even beyond that of Antonioni or Wenders. Their films may feature alienated, often indeterminate protagonists, but they populate narratives in which the depiction of movement and travel, of traversing geographical space, is palpable; necessarily so in that it often reflects a paradoxically aimless or vague state of mind⁴. In contrast, there is little sense in Serra's film not only of adventure but also of any a-priori physical movement at all. Don Quixote and Sancho are often seen walking through the landscapes in which they find themselves, but these are principally open fields and plains, with only brief sojourns at a river and in a forest. The

sense of actually travelling in the film, of going from one place to another, is dramatically minimised, and time seems to stretch out immeasurably. And it is precisely in this way that, like the concept of time, the space of the film becomes a liminal construct, its static irreducibility a correlative to the interior movement experienced by Quixote as his proximity to death parallels his proximity to God and to his faith and belief.

This sense of waiting for death and for God, which is presented in a de-dramatized narrative emptied of all incident, is a further presentation of in-between-ness, and it is why I proposed Samuel Beckett, and in particular *Waiting for Godot*, as an important point of reference in understanding *Honor de Cavalleria*. Like Beckett's most famous example of the theatre of the absurd, Serra's film is about stasis rather than movement—an interstitial work that enfolds entirely in a liminal narrative space and dead, or suspended, time in which two characters simply wait for something to happen. In addition to this approach, *Honor de Cavalleria* further shares its theatrical progenitor's exploration of the subjective construction and perception of reality, of what exactly constitutes reality, what is real, for the individual. Once again here we are firmly back in the realms of archetypal art cinema. Bordwell talks about how art cinema works with 'a different canon of realistic motivation, a new *vraisemblance*, justifying particular compositional options and effects'^{xix}. We have already seen how naturalistic, objective reality (that is, phenomenological verisimilitude) becomes subjectively transfigured, but this movement becomes thematized in the Beckettian stress on which of these realities is real. Beckett's work (not simply *Godot* but also, outstandingly, such dramas as *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*, which similarly take place in interstitial time in a single location) is marked by absences that make themselves felt as alternative realities that are out of reach to the hapless protagonists. In *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, this is most clearly seen in the repeated stress on the characters' lost pasts, which haunt them to such an extent that in *Godot* the tramps Vladimir and Estragon cannot remember or agree upon what they have done even the previous day. But they continue to wait and continue to find sustenance in the attempt. The point is that the moments of waiting, of temporal paralysis, comprise life and reality—that the past is another country and the present ceases to become real when it has passed, but that the attempt in the present to define oneself against this history has its own reality in a world in which we are as actors on an absurd stage.

In a comparable way, Serra's *Honor de Cavalleria* is a text scarred by lack, by absences. At a narrative level this is felt in the elision of the manifold incidents, adventures and indeed characters of the book; visually, it is inscribed in the diegesis as the effacing of the specific visions of Don Quixote, the fact that we watch him watching, contemplate his contemplation, and see the process in and on his face and as connoted in the natural world around him. At a thematic level, the point is similar to Beckett's: the moments in-between, moments of interstitial emptiness, form one reality in the absurd present, but the life of the mind can narrate, can bring-into-being, its own time, space and reality from which the individual can construct at least a workable identity and sense of self.

These specific notions of time, space and perception/contemplation represent, in philosophical terms, the Bergsonian notion of time and experience as represented in his famous antinomy of *élan vital* and matter, where the latter denies the flow and succession of the former. Its status lies in an intellectual, scientific attempt to know the world through classification and categorisation, that is by breaking time up into 'discreet moments^{xx}', and thereby denying its vitality, its perennial state of 'coming-into-being^{xxi}'. However, if we broaden our horizon from philosophy, and the philosophy of Bergson, to incorporate film studies, we immediately arrive at the work of someone very pertinent to art cinema and to *Honor de Cavallería*: Gilles Deleuze. In the 1980s, Deleuze drew heavily on Bergson's theories in writing a two-volume treatise on the cinema (*L'image-mouvement/Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *L'image-temps/Cinema 2: The Time-Image*). These works are unique in finding a prominent post-structuralist writing specifically about the cinema, and are important in the present consideration of art cinema because his dual conceptions of the dominant norms of filmmaking in the history of the cinema (the so-called movement and time images) closely approximate the paradigms of classical and art cinema, and are intimately bound up in conceptions of realism. The seismic shift, Deleuze argues, came about when the former was superseded by the latter, movement replaced by time (this was referred to by André Bazin as the 'fact-image^{xxii}'). The central force in this profound transformation, and thus in the birth of art cinema, was neo-realism. Instead of simply depicting social realities, as is often presumed, this school of filmmaking made it clear that 'the real was no longer represented or reproduced but 'aimed-at'^{xxiii}. It is therefore the case with this model that reality is not a pre-existing, stable, 'known' entity, not a tangible, extra-textual given that is simply recorded by the cameras of Rossellini and De Sica, et al⁵. Rather, like the conception of nationality I outlined earlier and like Bergson's theorization of *élan vital* and the flow of time, it is an ambiguous and flexible construct that must constantly be arrived at, deciphered, narrated into being. It is this central argument that leads Deleuze to introduce the concept of thought as a significant determinant in the time-image. Because the problematic he arrived at exceeds the level of the real, it is Deleuze's argument that it resides in the mental, in thought. There is thus a parallel change as the time-image takes precedence over the movement-image: that of film protagonists themselves transforming, becoming what Deleuze terms 'seers^{xxiv}' rather than actants or agents.

Honor de Cavallería is, in this sense, a proto-typical 'time-image' film. Indeed, I would go further and suggest that Serra is doing little short of re-introducing the pure concept of the time image and returning the art cinema to its origins, its birth, to what it once was. The Deleuzian conception of time, thought and perception could almost have been written with *Honor de Cavallería* in mind. Don Quixote is a character who cannot act, at least in any meaningful sense, and who instead contemplates, 'sees', the world around him as a textual mirror image of we the audience. These particularities of his characterisation literalize the movement from action and exterior to interior thought; they

narrativize the mental process of not only seeing the world but of transforming the world before the gaze in a way that is fundamentally comparable to Quixote's namesake on Cervantes' page. The film also visualises the 'coming-into-being' of time and space, as Quixote's fixated 'seeing' means that he becomes an author as well as a spectator, an actor on an absurd stage (that never really changes), as well as an audience member. He perennially narrates his world and his own narrative into being as he goes along.

In conclusion, we can thus see exactly how Serra's project reflects both Pasolini and Bresson, in particular how the latter's depictions of a soul in transit reverberate around an emphatic verisimilitude that allows little but the minute detail of the ordinary and the everyday. The casting of two non-professional actors in Lluís Carbó and Lluís Serrat needed both attentiveness to the face that reveals the soul and a Pasolini-esque attention to exterior type, in that the performers would essay two famous literary and oft-visualised characters, and as such would require the fulfilment of a number of particulars (age, physique, countenance, etc.). The interior world of Don Quixote, his ecstasies of the soul as contrasted with the mundaneness of his physical stasis and frustrating relationship with Sancho, progresses along the lines of *Pickpocket* [1959] to arrive at a privileged moment of rapture. In the case of *Honor de Cavallería*, this resides in the aforementioned, penultimate scene when we hear music for the first time. In Bresson's film it is, as Paul Schrader has detailed it, in the unconventional style that remains out of synch with filmmaking rules and norms until the moment at the end when Michel appears finally to break through the constraints that have alienated him throughout the narrative and experience human contact with Jeanne^{xxv}. It is a similar coming together that is highlighted in *Honor de Cavallería*'s sacred moment, when finally there appears to be a communion between Quixote and Sancho, as they both stand in rapt contemplation of the heavens where previously Sancho had shown complete indifference to share his master's vision, even when repeatedly prompted as in the case of the sunrise at the beginning of the film. Here, they both look together, the union symbolised both in the use of music and in the identical compositions of the pair standing on either side of a large tree looking upward. It is a perfect moment of stillness and repose in the last daylight in the film before the final shot of Don Quixote being carried away in the darkness: two moments that, taken together, succinctly summarise the progression of this singular art cinema text that today marks out a cinematic territory as romantically imagined and narrated-into-being as the reveries of its protagonist.

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Notes

- 1 In *Classical Hollywood Cinema* Bordwell argues that the formal tenets of art cinema that have been employed by US filmmakers have become naturalized as part of their intrinsically mainstream project. In other words, US cinema has absorbed the textual fea-

- tures of art cinema and controlled them within a genre framework.
- 2 I must also point out here the film *Man of La Mancha* [1972], adapted from Dale Wasserman's stage musical and directed by Arthur Hiller. It is of no great distinction. But its emphasis is firmly on performance and charade, depicting as it does a mock trial of Cervantes (played by Peter O' Toole) whilst he is awaiting the Inquisition. The author presents as his defence an amateur production of his text *Don Quixote*, which is acted by his fellow inmates. These performances then open out as de-facto dramatizations of scenes from the novel.
 - 3 Objective in a structural sense, in that a removal of the tight causality and coherent, known protagonists of classical Hollywood opens up fissures that relate to a character's experience of events in a way deemed truer to life (for example the extended bedroom scene in Godard's *À bout de souffle/Breathless* [1960], in which the plot grinds to a halt for over 20 minutes while Michel attempts to seduce Patricia, something far more important to him than the fact that the police are pursuing him).
 - 4 In point of fact, one need not go back to the first luminaries of art cinema to find films that contrast in this respect with *Honor de Cavalleria*. In recent years Spanish language filmmaking has given us several superior art cinema films and filmmakers that are directly comparable to Serra. In addition to the Chilean documentary director José Luis Torres Leiva's feature debut, *El Cielo, La Tierra Y La Lluvia* (*The Sky, The Earth and The Rain*, 2008), which scooped the FIPRESCI International Critic's prize at Rotterdam earlier this year, there is the Argentinean film *Los Muertos* [2004], directed by Lisandro Alonso, and the Spanish *Dies d'agost* (*August Days/Days of August*, 2006), by Marc Recha, director of the remarkable *Pau i el seu germà* (*Pau and his Brother*, 2001). These films (and one may well include *Pau* among them) are all minimalist, poetic road movies whose ostensible dramatic slightness is counteracted with an emphasis on the physical world through which the distanced, reserved, solipsistic characters travel. They could almost be termed non-narrative for the way in which fragments of stories and characters steadfastly refuse to cohere into a whole; they are simply broad markers of a structural framework that never gains prominence amongst the stress on the languid, natural ebb and flow of a journey and the detailed materiality of the locations.
- August Days* takes this to a Godardian extreme. As if to underline the unsuitability of cinema for the detailed exposition of actual lived lives and the attendant futility of becoming acquainted with the detached protagonists it presents, Recha uses a Terence Malick-esque omniscient voice-over, but by a character who never appears in the film and has no first hand experience of its events or peripheral characters. This aural presence is, in fact, the sister of the two brothers whose journey the film depicts, and she provides a potted biography of each person and location that they encounter on their journey through a remote rural milieu. This film even presents the ghost of an incident on which the plot can turn and develop that mirrors *Honor de Cavalleria*. One of the brothers suddenly goes missing, and cannot be found (although the search occupies little time in the *syuzhet's* construction of the events of the fabula). The film proceeds with the journey of the remaining brother, and little is communicated of any anguish he may be feeling. Until, like *Don Quixote*, the lost traveller reappears out of the blue, and the pair's travels come to an end.
- 5 Pasolini was an ardent theoretician of the real in art, and talked of reality as 'mankind's language'. This, he said, is a linguistic reality, and is a stable entity upon which filmmakers intrude, but which is then de-stabilized by other 'levels' of reality, such as technical and aesthetic, which intersect in an ongoing textual process. See the 1966 episode of the French television programme *Cinéma, de notre temps* (*Cinema of Our Time*) entitled *Pasolini: L'enragé* (*Pasolini: The Rebel*) for Pasolini's views on this topic
- i Mathews, P, *The End of an Era: A Cinephile's Lament, Sight & Sound*, October 2007, Volume 17, Issue 10 PP.16-18 The following month's issue included a response to, and a refutation of, Mathews' feature by Jonathan Romney
 - ii Takenori, S, in interview with Mark Schilling *Contemporary Japanese Film* Weatherhill, Inc., New York, Tokyo, 1999, PP.107-115
 - iii Berry, C & M, Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* Columbia University Press, New York, 2006, PP.1-16
 - iv Ibid. P.7
 - v Ibid. P.8
 - vi Ryall, T, *Art house, smart house, The Movie*, No.90, 1981
 - vii Cook, P & M. Bernink (eds), *The Cinema Book, 2nd Edition*, British Film Institute, London, 1999, P.107
 - viii Review online at <http://www.timeout.com/film/reviews/83946/honour-of-the-knights.html> This is one of a relatively few negative notices for Serra's film. Elsewhere, especially in *The Village Voice*, it was deemed an extraordinary work.
 - ix Nabokov, V, Bowers, F (eds) *Lectures on Don Quixote* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, New York, London, 1983 P.80-81
 - x Camhi, L, *Once Were Warriors, The Village Voice*, December 3rd, 2002. Online at <http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0249,camhi,40298,20.html>
 - xi Bresson, R, Griffin, J (trans) *Notes on the Cinematographer Quartet Books Limited, Great Britain*, 1986, PP.22-30
 - xii Ibid. PP.4-11 Bresson's discourse on models and automatic performances stressed such things as moving from the exterior to the interior, the importance of what is hidden as opposed to what is shown and repetition with the ultimate aim of removing will and thought from the process of acting (Ozu worked with his actors in a similar manner and had comparable aims in his work). Ultimately, he wanted to remove any sense of actors and roles and simply mould models taken from real life
 - xiii Bresson, R, Griffin, J (trans) *Notes on the Cinematographer*, P.11
 - xiv Ibid. P.4
 - xv Thomson, D *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, Little, Brown, Great Britain, 2002, P.104
 - xvi Bordwell, D, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, Great Britain, 1985, P.208
 - xvii Corless, K *Honour of the Knights* (DVD review) *Sight & Sound* June 2008, Volume 18, Issue 6 P.86
 - xviii Nowell-Smith, G, *Art Cinema*, in Nowell-Smith, G (ed), *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, P.569
 - xix Bordwell, D, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, P.206
 - xx Stokes, P, *Philosophy: The Great Thinkers*, Eagle Editions Limited, London, 2007, P.38
 - xxi Ibid.
 - xxii Bazin, A, Gray, H (trans), *What is Cinema?*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971, P.37
 - xxiii Deleuze, G, Tomlinson, H & R. Galeta (trans), *Cinema 2* Continuum, London, 1989, P.1
 - xxiv Ibid. P.2
 - xxv Schrader sums up this aspect of *Pickpocket* in an introduction on the Criterion DVD release of the film. He notes the ostensibly redundant doubling and trebling of information, the editing that utilises dead time to retard the pace, the avoidance of emotional close-ups, and the music used at unconventional moments.



On and Around *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*

Tsai goes back to his roots, and forges ahead...

ROBIN WOOD

...where angels fear to tread... (I'm no angel...)

It is clear that Tsai Ming-Liang's latest film is highly personal, and as such it invites the kind of probing that may appear impertinent and may also be wide of the mark. Fools like myself, however, rush in... It marks his return to his roots, his return, after many years, to his country of birth, Malaysia, and its major city Kuala Lumpur, but it may also be personal in other ways, without pressing things too far: there are plenty of clues, out of which we may concoct a partially hidden story that may or may not be valid and is open to various degrees of interpretation. Consider the following:

Tsai (who has been from the outset openly gay) is on record as saying that he will never make a film without Lee Kang-Sheng, a promise he has kept through seven movies.

In his first widely released film, *Rebels of the Neon God*, Lee plays a lonely outsider fascinated by a couple of boys who steal money from call-boxes; the character can be read as gay, though this is never made explicit.

In the next two films, *Vive l'Amour* and *The River*, Lee's character is explicitly gay. In *Vive l'Amour* he kisses in terror the lips of the sleeping (heterosexual) man he loves (and who doesn't deserve him). *The River* contains a sequence in which he visits a

gay bathhouse and has sex in a totally dark room with his father, who slaps him brutally when the light goes on.

In the next film, *The Hole*, the character is heterosexual, and this continues through all the subsequent films. In *What Time Is It There?*, he humiliates and punishes a man who tries to involve him in washroom sex.

I Don't Want to Sleep Alone opens with Lee unconscious on a bed in what appears to be (but isn't) some kind of hospital (it would be a very dubious one, as we find out later). Offscreen, perhaps from a radio, Tamino's aria from Act 1 of *The Magic Flute*, in which he gazes upon Pamina's portrait, is in progress: 'Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön' ('This face is supremely beautiful'). (The film was shot during the Mozart Bicentenary, celebrated all over the world; the vast abandoned building that was to become the central location '...felt almost like a post-modern opera theatre...I was reminded of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*'—Tsai, in an interview)..

Subsequently, some way into the film, we are returned to the prone, helpless, unconscious figure, but the performance of the opera has reached the Queen of the Night's 'Vengeance' aria: 'Die Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen' ('Hell's fury burns in my veins').

The main plot of the film concerns a young man (also played by Lee Kang-Sheng—Tsai has suggested in an interview that he can be read as the unconscious Lee's dream, and from here on, when necessary for clarity, I shall refer to them as Lee 1 and Lee 2), brutally beaten and left for dead, rescued by the film's main character, Rawang (Norman Atun), who takes him in, washes him lovingly, cares for him, brings him back to health, sleeps beside him, and very obviously adores him. (Tsai remarks in the interview that originally there were to have been 'some sex scenes' between the two men—which would have brought the film's development even closer to the evolution of Lee's screen career, from gay to straight).

When the young man recovers sufficiently, he sneaks out at night while his savior apparently sleeps, for a casual pickup with a girl his own age, and they have sex together (not very satisfactorily, but I'll return to that later, it's a somewhat different, though central and related, issue). The pickup is watched (from a distance) and followed by, the older man.

When he sneaks back into bed, the older man, who has, after all, saved the young man's life and lovingly nursed him back to health, attempts (in rage, desperation, ... revenge?) to murder him, but is unable to go through with it and collapses in tears. 'Hell's fury' burns indeed!

The relationship between invention and reality in art is always tenuous and variable. Questions arise: how much was consciously thought out by the artists involved, how much spontaneous invention? How much lived experience, and how much 'Why don't we try *this*?' Let me say at once that I have met Tsai briefly, and he does not at all strike me as someone who would attempt to cut his ex-lover's throat with the sharp edge of a half-opened tin can. It seems impossible to resist a sense of parallels between film and reality, but I imagine Tsai and Lee had a good laugh over what may well have been a monstrous parody of their shifting relationship, which might well have activated a certain amount of pain and disappointment, but clearly was dealt with in a civilized way, reaching the Wordsworthian level of 'emotion recollected in tranquility'. They continue to make films together, and Lee has since made his own debut as a film director, with committed support and encouragement from Tsai. I would guess, however, that the personal story underlying their work (if my guess is correct—and I stand to be corrected) accounts for the particular intensity, complexity and profundity of what I take to be Tsai's finest work to date: a masterpiece that, like most masterpieces, demands the closest attention, patience, and repeated viewings: demands that tend not to find a ready response in our take-a-bite-and-spit-it-out, rapidly disintegrating civilization. (Toronto today seems in many respects not unlike the Kuala Lumpur we see in the film, just a tad more streamlined: people out of work, homeless, reduced to begging in what is supposed to be a civilized city, everyone rushing to somewhere, whether they have anywhere to go or not, a general atmosphere of desperation...the same....the same, perhaps, today, all over the allegedly civilized world). The film's reception and distribution has not been quite what one would expect from the latest (and perhaps greatest, most complex and demanding) work by one of the finest filmmakers of our time. I

think back to the receptions given, by critics and public, not so many years ago, to the latest work of Fellini, Bergman, Antonioni...Their latest films were given long runs, with substantial audiences, in every major city. *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* is certainly their equal, and (at least in Toronto) it has gone straight to DVD. Tsai is trapped (and is struggling to survive) in the very world his films so disturbingly depict.

I shall assume in what follows a reasonably intimate knowledge of the film, the only way in which a discussion has meaning: F.R. Leavis' ideal critical exchange: 'This is so, isn't it?'/ 'Yes, but...'. The best way to discuss so complex and elliptical a film seems to me to be to examine certain salient aspects, formal and narrational, and hope they gradually cohere into a sense of the whole—or the sense that a whole is no longer possible. .

Long Takes

The long take has been a major component of Tsai's style from the outset: there are examples already in *Rebels of the Neon God*. For Tsai, it has a particular characteristic: the camera is static throughout, never an excuse for virtuoso movement and reframings. Leaving aside miniscule shifts of an inch or so in close-shot scenes (such as the climactic sex-in-surgical masks scene), I believe there is only one actual tracking shot in the entire film, the early shot of Rawang's gang of friends carrying the mattress across a crowded street. I want to examine here three examples of varying lengths, each with a quite distinct purpose and quality. The first instance (and a direct challenge to the spectator) is the final shot of *Vive l'Amour*: it is held for over six minutes and consists solely of a woman (medium shot, head and shoulders) sitting on a park bench and weeping uncontrollably. She has come from a night of alienated sex (we don't see it, but we know enough of her partner) and is on her way to another day of alienated work (trying to sell apartments to marginally less alienated businessmen—they've got money). The buildup is her long walk through an alienating park-in-progress: new, young, leafless trees, piles of rubble, earth without grass, mud, puddles, the city beyond with endless streams of traffic. She is sitting on a bench in an all-but-deserted open air amphitheatre—rows of empty seats, one elderly man reading a newspaper several rows ahead of her. The shot constitutes the climax of the whole film, the despair towards which every previous action has moved (though never reaching this degree of acknowledgement). The festival audience with whom I first saw it began to fidget, then giggle, about three minutes in: a very nervous giggle, perhaps because of the undercurrents of unease the shot generates, and which couldn't have been generated with less: 'Why is he making us watch this?' but also, beneath that, a growing and unwelcome sense of understanding and sharing, which wouldn't have been there if she had just sat down, begun to cry, and THE END had appeared.

The final effect is not entirely simple. The environment is ugly and desolate, certainly, but it is also 'work in progress': trees will be planted, will grow, the grass will cover the land, some form of new life will take over. From this viewpoint, the woman's tears can be read positively too: the civilization which the film has depicted and of which she is a member is not exactly encourag-

ing, but if the tears embody despair, the extremeness of the breakdown can also conceivably lead to a rethinking, a movement towards a new life, the impetus to struggle.

I Don't Want to Sleep Alone offers numerous instances of Tsai's fascination with the static long take, of which I single out two. The first, barely two minutes long, makes up in complexity what it lacks in duration. It is highly complex, rich, and crucial to the narrative, and it requires contextualization.

Lee 2, homeless and hungry, watches a blatantly exploitive 'con' game and gets beaten to near-death when it's discovered he has no money; concurrently, with the help of a gang of friends, Rawang (unemployed, sleeping in an abandoned and unfinished building) retrieves a battered mattress from a rubbish heap, and they carry it to his home (passing on their way a beggar-woman, accompanied by a young girl, singing a Malaysian version, free but immediately recognizable, of 'Sing a Song of Sixpence!').

The long take has a remarkable formal elegance; movement within the frame aside, it resembles an Old Master you might want to hang on your wall. It is night.

Extreme background: A grandiose, possibly 'Royal', building, with huge formal pillars overlooking the street; before it a low wall and a sidewalk—on which we might just make out what appears at first a patch of darkness, but it moves awkwardly; before that, a two-way thoroughfare, fast cars moving in both directions. The figure (drunken? injured?) struggles along by the wall and is overtaken by the rowdy, cheerful gang with Rawang's mattress. Across the freeway, at the edge of the road, a tall tree and an expanse of grass with a dark patch and tree stump, unkempt. The struggling figure staggers across the street, collapses against the tree, staggers on to the dark patch and collapses, apparently permanently; the mattress gang also cross, intertwining with the figure (the choreography is intricate). One of the gang laughs, they move on out of frame, but Rawang returns to rescue the stray, now either unconscious or dead: all this in remote long shot. It proves to be the crucial moment in the narrative (which almost didn't happen!) upon which the rest of the film, its entire structure, depends: the helpless figure is Lee 2 *alter ego* of Lee 1, his rescuer the man who will fall in love with him. The moment is enhanced by the visual beauty of the image, the magical and unforgettable composition.

My third example follows soon after, and is in fact two takes, connected and continuous: Rawang helping Lee 2 to piss. In the first, he is preparing a makeshift bed, looks up, and sees the beaten and severely injured man struggling at the end of the corridor; he guides him to the makeshift outlet. In the second, he holds him, guides him, touches his body in a way that suggests his own pleasure without any sense that he is 'taking advantage' of the other man's helplessness. It is unnecessary to describe it in detail. The length of the sequence is necessary to establish both Rawang's tenderness and his respect for the other person.

Is It a Dream?

A number of people, including Tsai himself, have suggested that the film can be read as a dream. I resisted this at first—it seemed

too easy a way of dealing with the film's puzzles and complexities—but I've gradually come to accept it as at least a possible way of making sense of much that is initially confusing.

If it is a dream, the dreamer is clearly the permanently comatose, perhaps dying, figure on the bed in the film's first shot: Lee Kang-Sheng, whom I call Lee 1—and he is obviously dreaming of his doppelgänger Lee 2, who promptly materializes in the second shot on a street in Kuala Lumpur, apparently hungry, lost and helpless, but also alive and active. If we accept this, then it follows that everything in the film is Lee 1's dream *except* the scenes of the two women tending him—and they, too, are eventually drawn into the dream, as participants. There seems to be a general assumption that the older woman is his mother and the younger her daughter (and therefore his sister), but (unless something is missing from the subtitles) there seems no actual evidence of this. It is of course perfectly plausible. If they are indeed his mother and sister, then the dream climaxes in double incest: the brutal sex with the mother in a dark alley, the desperate attempts at sex while wearing surgical masks to offset pollution, with the sister in the abandoned building. I've no quarrel with this: both sequences have something of nightmare about them, and the sense of frustration that often accompanies it. The two sex dreams, and their very different qualities, in fact follow logically from the women's treatment of the unconscious Lee 1 in previous scenes: the mother, in desperation, pummeling and even masturbating him, the sister nursing him gently and tenderly.

I realize that in this account I have barely touched the surface of this remarkable film, one to which I know I shall return. Tsai's recurrent concerns with the collapse of civilization, the loss of the past, climate change, pollution (in *Vive l'Amour*, in *The Hole*, in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*) are all very much present in the new film and I have barely touched them. These are films to live with, and should become permanent landmarks in our current throw-away culture.

Postscript

FOR CAT LOVERS ONLY

I found my cat Nikki (named after Margaret Sheridan in *The Thing from Another World*) ten years ago in a cage in our local Humane Society. I knew at once that she was a Hawks heroine: all the other cats were sleeping or just lazy, Nikki was up and clawing at the bars—I could almost hear 'Take me out of here! Take me out of here!' She has proved to be a cross between Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby* and Bacall in *To Have and Have Not*. And she loves sitting on my lap to watch movies. The highlight of her career so far came when we watched *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*. In the scene where Lee Kang-Sheng sits by the pool in the abandoned building and a large moth settles on his back, Nikki leapt into life, dashed over to the TV, and clawed frantically at the image. This was repeated exactly a week or so later, when we watched the film again, but when a third viewing came she outdid herself: ignoring the screen, she dashed around to the back of the television set, searching for the vanished moth. Nikki and I wish to thank Tsai and Lee for these pleasurable (if, for Nikki, slightly frustrating) experiences.

"I Heart Hedwig"

CONRAD PAGE

Hedwig and the Angry Inch is an internationally acclaimed motion picture adapted from a musical by John Cameron Mitchell. Mitchell wrote, directed, and starred in the film as Hedwig, a tall task for anyone, but for a first time writer/director/actor? I hardly had high expectations. That being said, within a frame of the credit roll, I knew it was one of the best films that I have ever experienced and with humility I state that this review could never hope to do *Hedwig* justice.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch is a film about an internationally ignored rocker from East Berlin who sings about his member being cut off in a messy operation. Traveling around America performing in shady bars, we learn of Hedwig's story and the great injustice she has suffered as a result of becoming transgendered. The film's glory lies in its affirmation of gender fluidity and its ability to depict the pain of the individual and the mentality of mainstream pop culture while offering to the viewer something most queer films do not, reconciliation and acceptance.

The film opens with Hedwig casting off a red umbrella while entering the backdoor of her concert venue, a seafood restaurant chain. She portrays the attitude of a genuine rock star as she passes the line-up for the sold-out Tommy Gnosis show; we later find out that Tommy (Michael Pitt) and his story play a significant role in the film. The opening credits depict restaurant patrons as offended and disgusted with Hedwig's concert, yet at any given table for two one patron is always more interested in the show than the other. Perhaps we are to understand this as a contextualization of heteronormative social cues and our obligation to them. Despite the seemingly offensive performance, we see that Hedwig has groupies in the crowd who proudly display their allegiance with yellow foam hair. The lyrics of the film's first song "Tear Me Down" tell us of the Berlin wall, but more importantly the lyrics tell us that Hedwig represents that infamous wall. She stands before the audience "as a divide between east and west, slavery and freedom, top and bottom, man and woman". The lyrics serve as a matter of fact interpretation of Hedwig's place in society, allowing the viewer to see it as a truth before their eyes as the film opens. Yet what is most interesting is Hedwig's response to society's first impression of her; "ain't much difference between a bridge and a wall". During the first few moments of the film the viewer is forced to decide on how to interpret Hedwig and more importantly, if they will allow her to serve as a bridge or a wall on the journey of understanding gender fluidity.

There are several visual aspects of the film that add to the overall effectiveness and meaning of *Hedwig*. Throughout the film there are animated sequences which help to explain and inform the inner turmoil Hedwig is experiencing. The cartoons illustrate Hedwig's country of origin with the Berlin wall, and they also help advance the notion of individual duality. They depict how an individual may feel, as if there are two opposing yet complementary versions of one, how they consume one another, then separate, and then reunite. The animations throughout the film emphasize that the fluidity of the individual is in constant motion, an almost natural state. Another visual cue that reinforces the idea of duality within the individual is Hedwig's tattoo. We see that the tattoo is two pro-





files of a 'face pie' that fit together, but they are not together. In the last scene of the film as Hedwig walks out into the world naked and vulnerable, we see that the tattoo on her thigh has reconstituted into one complete face. At the end of the film, Hedwig is whole.

It is worth mentioning that the set design and Hedwig's costumes add richness and an organic dimension to the film. Hedwig performs one of her concerts from behind a salad bar, while confidently wearing a fur coat with a red paint splatter on the back. At one point Hedwig's trailer turns into a stage and she performs in a costume that is made entirely from blonde hair. Dozens of outrageous and original costumes are worn by Hedwig throughout the film and they all represent her fluctuating mentality. When she is feeling down and assimilated, her plain clothing reflects this mood, when she is performing she looks like a genuine rock star and when she feels complete, she wears nothing. The homemade costumes and basic yet innovative and colourful set design contributes to the overall indie texture and message of the film; we are as fluid on the inside as we are on the outside.

The music and lyrics in the film are pivotal to understanding the meaning of *Hedwig* as they describe and characterize our heroine's struggles through a train of roaring Bowie-esque glam rock numbers that summon a feeling of gender bending hysteria. Do I hear *rebel rebel*? Each song and complementary scene adds a piece to the puzzle that is Hedwig. There are several lyrics and scenes that are worth examining, particularly the scene where Hedwig first encounters Tommy Gnosis; a rock superstar that learned everything he knows from Hedwig. His success denied her public credit for her songs, leaving her as "an internationally ignored star".

At the half way point in the film Hedwig performs "Wicked Little Town", my favorite song of the entire film. She sings in a coffee shop to a crowd of seven; some spectators know her better than they care to admit. Her performance is constantly disrupted either by patrons crossing her stage to use the washroom or by the cries of over-eager backup singers. Hedwig reports that she is talking to "Phil Collins's people, but then again, aren't we all?" This statement creates a sense of urgency and expectation for all, allowing Hedwig to rationalize her transcendence of the atmosphere. Despite the small turn out, Hedwig sings as if it is a sold-out performance. The song "Wicked Little Town" speaks of the pressures one feels as a result of the environment in which they are in, but in an almost generic big town sense. This creates a digestible moment of struggle we can all relate to outside the world of rock and roll. Hedwig tells the crowd that this is the first song she had ever written, and that it was meant for a "boy" to sing. As she sings the song she notices Tommy in the crowd, who is watching her performance through the security of fake plants. We see that Tommy is mesmerized by her performance (but then again, aren't we all?), and that Hedwig has taken notice of him also, initially in a sexual sense. We see that Tommy is wearing a God t-shirt and we later find out that he, at this point in the film, is a devout Christian. When Hedwig finishes the song, she takes a cloth from her microphone stand, wipes her face leaving a perfect imprint of her make-up, and throws it

to Tommy in a most rock star manner. But in truth, the gesture is much deeper than a rock star stereotype. The cloth, in a sense, represents the Shroud of Turin, and Hedwig is to replace God in Tommy's eyes. Tommy now worships the god of rock and roll, and her name is Hedwig. Cut to the next scene and we see Hedwig beginning to teach Tommy everything she knows. Tommy asks Hedwig to give him the apple of knowledge paralleling Adam and Eve, but Tommy at this time does not realize that he and Hedwig are anything but Adam and Eve. She eventually gives him the name "Gnosis", the Greek god of knowledge. The name truly belongs to her.

There is a scene during Hedwig's tutelage of Tommy in which they speak of love. Hedwig tells Tommy that love is eternal because love creates something that was not previously there. Procreation is an element of this creation but in truth, it is a narrow definition. It stands to reason that if procreation were the only definition, Hedwig would truly be deemed hopeless in love. It is at this time that Hedwig creates with Tommy, by giving him a silver cross on his forehead that is destined to be his rock star signature. When she shows it to him in a hand held mirror, we see a frame that exposes a blend of Hedwig's face and Tommy's. In this moment, Tommy is the only participant that experiences this image and interprets it as exclusively seeing himself. The scene serves as a solid mechanism of foreshadowing.

The song "Sugar Daddy" informs the viewer of Hedwig's back story and how she came to America. She met a U.S. Army general, he wooed her with free enterprise candy, they fell in love and he promised to take her back to America. There is one catch; she must get married to him as a legally certified woman. When Hedwig, or Hansel at this point in the timeline, speaks with his mother, she advises him that "in order to be free, one must give up a part of one's self; you've got to leave something behind." Hedwig is compelled.

Once in America, the General quickly leaves Hedwig for another boy. At this pivotal moment in the film, Hedwig looks and reflects upon a photo of the General happily eating a foot long hotdog, a now obvious pleasure of his, a gratification that she can no longer fulfill. Yet in this same moment, Hedwig hears on the news that the Berlin wall has fallen, the patient people of East Berlin are now free. This is when Hedwig is at her absolute lowest, the two worlds which she has come to know have simultaneously crashed and burned. Her response to her situation is the formation of the band "Hedwig and the Angry Inch." The band marches into the trailer playing the song "Wig in a Box." "I put on my make-up/ Turn up the eight track/ I'm pulling the wig down from the shelf/ Suddenly I'm this punk rock star/ Of stage and screen/ And I ain't never / I'm never turning back."

Hedwig's entrenchment, entrapment and continuation of the "Hedwig" persona from this point until the end of the film ultimately are the cause of her misery and self-loathing.

Hedwig's band-mate and occasional lover is a female to male transgender named Yitzhak (Miriam Shor). The relationship between the two is complicated and never fully explained to the viewer, but at one point in their relationship Hedwig may have seen Yitzhak as her possible pre-ordained cosmic mate. At the beginning of the film, we see Yitzhak maintaining Hedwig's mul-

tiple wigs in a hotel room alone. As he looks at the wig the viewer can see temptation in his eyes. He hesitantly tries the wig on but shamefully rips it off as Hedwig enters. It is obvious that Yitzhak is having difficulties with his choice of living as a man, but ignores it for the time being. After a brief separation, Hedwig and Yitzhak reunite at the end of the film for a final performance. It is at this point while on stage, when Yitzhak ceremoniously tries to put the wig on Hedwig that Hedwig refuses the wig and relinquishes it to him, allowing the viewer to understand the gender journey. Hedwig has known of Yitzhak's struggle all along, yet the wig represents two completely different things to each individual. For Hedwig the wig is oppression. For Yitzhak, the wig is coveted. Yitzhak steps up onto a large speaker, proudly places the wig on his head and falls into the audience. As Yitzhak crowd surfs, we see that she has transformed into a stunningly beautiful woman. This is not the first time for Yitzhak as a woman, but it is the first time the viewer sees her as one. This secondary character had a silent struggle with her identity and a lack of gender confidence which cast her into the background. But with a new found self-acceptance she dives into the spotlight, further advancing the notion that gender is truly fluid. Yitzhak has gone from woman, to man, and then back to woman almost seamlessly.

Towards the end of the film the true history between Hedwig and Tommy Gnosis is discovered by the media. Consequently Tommy's record sales plummet and Hedwig is embraced by the public. But it does not take Hedwig long to appreciate the recognition she long sought after does not make her feel complete, because she is not. While on stage Hedwig realizes that she is a sell-out, she strips off the Hedwig persona and leaves the stage, like a true rock star. She goes next door to listen to Tommy's solo performance for a non-existent crowd on a desolate stage.

At the end of the film Hedwig acquires reconciliation, and realizes that the other half of herself, for which she has long been searching, lied within all along. This epiphany occurs while she witnesses Tommy Gnosis giving a solo performance of her first song "Wicked Little Town." But he has changed the lyrics to communicate to her the error of his ways. In the song he asks for forgiveness, that he didn't realize how much he took from her, and that Hedwig is more man or woman than any god could hope to create. That she is something beautiful and new. He also communicates that there is no cosmic lover pre-assigned, which had been a long held belief of Hedwig's, and the viewer sees that she has realized and accepted this as truth. Hedwig replaces Tommy on the stage to finish the song and endorse its message. Cut to the final scene in the film and Hedwig is emerging from a dark alley, naked and stumbling, yet composed and confident. She is reborn into the world. We know that Hedwig is whole.

The film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* has touched me deeply. It has become one of my top films of all time, next to *Silence of the Lambs* and *There's Something About Mary*. In preparation for this paper I enthusiastically screened the film several times, not to mention having added the soundtrack to my MP3 player; this way Hedwig can be with me wherever I go! Yet I must ask myself, why I have over identified with this film? Why am I insist-

ing to anyone who will listen that they must hear *Hedwig's* message? I can attribute this to a couple of factors.

Recently I have explored the academic literature pertaining to transgender, resulting in a new found understanding of the underlying motivations for transgender individuals. I feel as if *Hedwig* has provided a human touch and perspective for me which complements and reinforces transgender and queer theory. Ultimately I feel as if the film captures true representation and reconciliation, which is no easy task. Also the film advances the notion of gender fluidity and its importance in discovering one's true self. I identify as a gay male but in my ignorant security of coming out, I incorrectly assumed that my own process of sexual fluidity ended there. *Hedwig* has forced me to dig deeper into my psyche and reevaluate how I perform, present and interpret my own gender. It's possible I have over identified not with the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, but with transgender theory in general. I have concluded that I do not suffer from gender dysphoria but this film evokes feelings of both empathy and a peculiar happiness that relates directly to its main character. It has forced me to recognize the existence of my own internal duality and has provoked an attempt at reconciliation within myself. At the very least, I owe it to *Hedwig* and queer theory to begin to ask myself the hard questions. Will there be easy answers? I think so... maybe.

As a side note, I was astonished to see that Hedwig looks strikingly similar to the actress Rachel Griffiths from *Six Feet Under*, and *Brothers and Sisters*. I enjoy both of these shows, but one in secret. When I first viewed the film *Hedwig*, I had to triple check that these two actors were not the same person. It took some convincing, but it makes me wonder how the image of one person could be so accepted in society while another image so similar is deemed as offensive.

The film is a beautiful piece of art, imagery and social commentary that is reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman's work in the seriousness with which it approaches its material. For me, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* provides the complete experience that I expect from film, but so rarely receive. The film's music is wonderful. There are tones of classical, country, rock, folk and blues throughout, a mixed bag of perfection. Jonathon Cameron Mitchell is a genius; if I bumped into him on the street, I would be compelled to give him a hug. The set design and costumes leave nothing to be desired. I would argue that subtle campy tones are embedded in the film, which only adds to the texture, legitimacy, and experience of it all; though this is up for debate. Ultimately, this film is a celebration. At one point we see the words "deny me and be doomed" spray-painted across an alley wall. I believe that this phrase complements the film's message of gender fluidity perfectly. It speaks to the here, the now, the future, and the consequences of ignorance. The denial we experience is that little piece of Hedwig which we all carry inside of us, but only few dare to speak her name. Not me, not anymore. I heart Hedwig.

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The Voice of Marianne Faithfull

On Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*

KOHEI USUDA

Walking around the halls of Versailles, and passing from her grand public bedroom into her small private apartments, surrounded by her fabrics and trinkets, I could imagine the girl... Being there you can feel how lost they must have been, so isolated from any kind of reality outside their gates. And I tried to imagine her being there, then. A gold-plated, Versailles hangover of the memory of a lost girl, leaving childhood behind, to the final dignity of a woman...

—Sofia Coppola¹

Francis Ford and Sofia Coppola

Jean-Luc Godard, while professing his admiration for *The Apple* (1998) directed by the then 17 year-old Samira Makhmalbaf, dismissed any suggestion that her father Mohsen—the powerhouse filmmaker in Iran—had had any helping hand in the making of his daughter's film. "Everyone said that her father helped her", said Godard. "I've seen one of his films, which was very mediocre... *The Apple* is a very original film, like Cassavetes' early pictures, except that you can see it's a film shot by a young woman."²

Alongside the auteur of *Blackboards* (2000) and *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003), the 36 year-old Sofia Coppola is another high profile second-generation female filmmaker to emerge in the last decade. Her father is, needless to say, Francis Ford Coppola, the multiple Oscar-winning director of the *Godfather* trilogy. However, beside their surname, what are the common threads connecting the films by the father and the daughter?

To begin with the older Coppola likes to explore the themes of masculine collectivity and of men on a mission, be it an Italian-American mafia in New York (*The Godfather*, 1972), a group of teen gangsters in a small town (*The Outsiders*, *Rumble Fish*, both 1983), or the US military waging war in the South

Asian jungle (*Apocalypse Now*, 1979). On the other hand, ever since her 1998 short *Lick the Star*, the younger Coppola appears captivated by the fragile emotions of young women, be it high school girls in the suburb (*The Virgin Suicides*, 1999), an American girl in Tokyo (*Lost in Translation*, 2003), or a teenage queen in 16th century France (*Marie Antoinette*, 2006).

Nevertheless, if we are asked to identify one situation commonly found in their films, we could say that both Coppolas like to portray an "outsider" who enters into a world foreign to him or her. *The Godfather* is a case in point: despite having maintained a certain distance from his mafia-tied family, Al Pacino's Michael Corleone is unwittingly elected to head a crime syndicate after the death of his father. Or take *Apocalypse Now*: Marlon Brando's Colonel Kurtz is relegated deep into the jungle of Cambodia, away from the civilized world of Saigon, where he lives like a king among the natives. In *Rumble Fish*, Mickey Rourke's colour-blind poet-gangster returns from the city to his sleepy hometown, only to find that he no longer belongs there and that doom awaits him. The latter is a great film of claustrophobia, set in a bizarre and colourless American town of almost Kafkaesque proportion. Its inhabitants appear to be trapped inside the small town indefinitely, where one could only dream of leaving. This is the similar situation in which Keanu Reeves' lawyer from London finds himself at Dracula's haunted castle in the older Coppola's version of the Bram Stoker novel. Indeed, FFC's settings are often closed-circuit worlds from which his characters could never get out of.

This theme is more pronounced in Sofia Coppola's three feature films to date. Indeed, her main concern has been *claustrophobic situations*, in which her characters are increasingly isolated and shut down from the external influences. Moreover, the settings in her films are often limited to a single edifice (school,



Marie Antoinette

house, hotel, chateau, etc.); for one reason or the other, her characters find it hard to get out of these situations, not unlike the bourgeois partygoers in Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angels* (1962). To prove this point, in her debut feature *The Virgin Suicides*, the five sisters of the Lisbon family are locked up in their own house by their over-protective parents; in her follow-up *Lost in Translation*, two jetlagged and insomniac Americans voluntarily ensconce themselves inside Tokyo's Park Hyatt hotel; in her latest film *Marie Antoinette*, a young Austrian princess is married off to Louis XVI at Versailles in order to produce the heir for the French dauphin.

Furthermore, Coppola's claustrophobic situations appear to be the reason why her films are always constructed around *leisure time*, which results in her characters having too much idle time on their hands. Face-to-face with the void of ennui, her heroines have no recourse other than to fill their leisure time preoccupying themselves with activities of some kind, however trivial they may appear to the eyes of the others.

Lost in Translation is a case in point: the two Americans caught inside the Park Hyatt act as though playing the game of hide-and-seek; the hotel serves as their playground in which they cross paths to-and-fro, always bumping into each other at the bar, the swimming pool, the elevator, the entrance—reminiscent of the burlesque beach hotel prominently featured in Tati's *Mr Hulot's Holiday* (1953).³

Sometimes, tired of occupying themselves in play, momentarily they sneak out of their confinement for a breath of fresh air. Thus, the two Americans go on an excursion into Tokyo's adventurous nightlife, which brings them to a karaoke bar, a strip club, and a house party in the company of Japanese hipsters.

In this sense, it is more than fitting that the director of *Lost in Translation* should choose the historical figure of Marie Antoinette as the subject of her subsequent film. Indeed, once falling into Coppola's hands, the notorious Queen of France similarly finds herself unable to get out of her confinement at the Château de Versailles. As a result, Marie Antoinette has no choice but to indulge herself in the luxury of epic proportion that the royal palace places at her service. To such an extent that—as the history tells us—she is driven to a death by guillotine by the infuriated common folks.

The condition of imprisonment and the time for leisure

By now it is probably safe to say that a biopic chronicling a royal subject constitutes a filmic genre in itself. Apropos Mamoulian's *Queen Christina* (1933), Sternberg's *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), Mizoguchi's *Princess Yang Kwei Fei* (1955), Visconti's *Ludwig* (1972), and Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987), more often than not this genre deals specifically with two subjects, i.e. the condition of imprisonment and the time for leisure.

The same goes for the recent biopics such as Alexander Sokurov's *The Sun* (2005) and Stephen Frears' *The Queen* (2006), devoted to chronicling Emperor Hirohito and Queen Elizabeth respectively. In the former film, between military briefings in an underground complex, Sokurov's Hirohito fills his leisure time taking a nap, studying science, composing haiku, and admiring the pinups of Hollywood stars; and it is only when

Douglas MacArthur sends a limousine for him that Hirohito finally ventures out of his underground bunker for a brief tête-à-tête with the US general. Similarly, Frears' Elizabeth decides to ignore a crisis taking place in Britain at large, choosing instead to remain in her peaceful Scottish castle where she occupies herself with trifling matters such as tea ceremonies, picnics, phone conversations, etc. Once again, it is only at the very last minute that, at Tony Blair's urging, she travels back to Buckingham Palace to ease the tension triggered by the death of Diana.

From this point-of-view, Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* is no exception in her approach to the genre. Despite Marie Antoinette's torments at being cast to produce an heir to Louis XVI, her excursion from Versailles is limited only to one brief getaway to a lavish masked ball. Otherwise, like Lady Chatterley, she seems content with building for herself a small farm within the Versailles estate and finding solace in an extramarital love affair. Unlike her shadowy Doppelgänger played by Asia Argento who takes off in a carriage in full flight, Marie Antoinette is only capable of looking wistfully at the outside world passing before her eyes from the carriage). Akin to the royal subjects in Sokurov and Frears, Coppola's Marie Antoinette does not outwardly express her desire to break free from her virtual confinement. Rather, it is in the form of a *voice* from off-screen that, as we shall see below, she finally comes to recognize the helplessness of her Versailles existence, just as the voluntary captives of *The Sun* and *The Queen* are each lured to the outside by external influences.

The voice of Marianne Faithfull

Above all, what is distinctive about Coppola's film is that it is interspersed throughout with the *voice-over* of Marie Antoinette's mother reading out the letters addressed to her daughter. In those letters, Marianne Faithfull—who plays her mother, the Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa—repeatedly reminds her daughter not to forget why she was sent off to marry the French dauphin in the first place, to provide the heir to the crown.

In *Marie Antoinette*, then, it is the voice of Marianne Faithfull from off-screen space (i.e. outside Versailles) that constantly threatens the existence of Marie Antoinette. While the latter satisfies her vanity by continuing to indulge in the finest clothes and cuisines of the period—she even has the Chinese emperor send jasmine tea for her—Marie Antoinette is reminded by Faithfull's voice-over that her status at the court is not at all secure or guaranteed until she delivers an heir. The significance attached to Faithfull's role, despite the limited time she actually appears on-screen, is further emphasized by the fact that Coppola gives the former rock star of *Broken English* the only privilege of voice-over in the entire film.⁴

Though in the title role of Marie Antoinette Coppola provides a great portrait of Kirsten Dunst—J. Hoberman remarked that Coppola “documents” the starlet of *Spider-Man 2* (2004) rather than the character she is performing⁵—arguably Marianne Faithfull—or rather *her voice*—has the most significant role in the film.

Regarding the usage of voice in films, in his book *The Voice in Cinema*, Michel Chion outlines that the voice without a face—

such as Faithfull's voice-over—is granted with a certain power in the cinema. This figure which he calls the “*acousmètre*” has often the power to control the characters and even to influence the outcome of the film. Because of the *acousmètre's* very invisibility in the image, its words and the voice could influence the trajectory of the film in a God-like presence:

The *acousmètre* is all-seeing, its word is like the word of God: “No creature can hide from it.” The one who is not in the visual field is in the best position to see everything that’s happening. The one you don’t see is in the best to see you—at least this is the power you attribute to him.⁶

As if to prove Chion's hypothesis, once Faithfull's voice disappears from the soundtrack following her character's death, her voice-over is immediately taken over by the angry shouts of an off-screen mob gathering in protest at the gates of Versailles. The threatening voices now besiege the royal palace in numbers, belonging to the dissatisfied populace eager to overthrow the monarchy and demand Marie Antoinette's death by guillotine.

In *Marie Antoinette*, it is always the voices coming from an off-screen space which open up the enclosed palace to the outside, which we could perhaps call—for the lack of better terms—“reality” itself. Marie Antoinette's phantasmagorical world of Versailles that relies greatly on the artifice of visual excessiveness (colours, splendour, luxury, etc.) is in actuality threatened at all times by the voices from the void of off-screen space. It is almost as if two worlds, that of the visual and of sound, are constantly colliding and are at conflict within the film. Regarding Coppola's film, we could even say that “There are two films, the film of the image and the film of the voices”, as Marguerite Duras once described of her own film, *Le Femme du Gange* (1974).⁷

The importance of voice in Sofia Coppola

Even though Coppola works within enclosed settings, it is short-sighted to dismiss her films for not opening up to the reality. It would be a disservice, for instance, to blame Coppola for setting the majority of *Lost in Translation* within the American-owned Park Hyatt, even though the film takes place in Tokyo. Nor can we blame the same filmmaker for remaining exclusively in Marie Antoinette's phantasmagorical world of Versailles, thereby excluding the image of the French Revolution taking place just outside the gate. On the contrary, the viewer is made aware that the outside world exists and that it is at all times a threatening shadow over Versailles, as effectively manifested in Marianne Faithfull's voice-over and later in the angry shouts of the mob. Therefore it is missing the point to claim—as some critics wrongly assumed—that the film is “devoid of a point of view” or that Coppola “seems as unconcerned by her subject as Marie-Antoinette was indifferent to the plight of her people and the world she lived in” (Agnès Poirier).⁸ Instead, we are fully aware of their presences, just as in Duras' *India Song* (1975) we are made conscious that India exits through the song sung by the voice of the Other—the native beggar woman from off-screen space—despite all we see in the visual field is that of the isolated French embassy and its ghostlike colonialists.⁹

As in Duras' film, Coppola opens up and destroys the closed-circuit world of Versailles through the voices coming from off-screen space. To repeat, the reality makes its appearance in the voices, which conclusively reduce the phantasmagoria of Versailles to no more than an illusion. As proof, Coppola concludes the film with a striking shot of Marie Antoinette's lavish bedroom now abandoned and depopulated, with its wallpaper in tatters, its furniture looted and destroyed, and its chandeliers shattered. It is as though the mob of voices have swept away like thunder all the illusions and phantasmagoria and that only the remains of the former splendour exist.

Conclusion

In viewing Sofia Coppola's films one should not disregard the importance the filmmaker attributes to the voice. For Coppola, it is above all the speech-act rather than writing—the phonation, the sound—that fascinate her as a filmmaker. In a brief scene preceding the death of Marie Antoinette's mother, Coppola presents an image of Marianne Faithfull *speaking out* the content of the letter to her daughter, to an aide who transcribes her words on paper. In her refusal to show the letter itself as an image, this provides further proof of the importance of the voice.

In hindsight, the quality of vocal composition in her films is perhaps yet another quality shared between the younger and the older Coppolas alike. Once, FFC had used Brando's “hoarse, cracking, intimate voice” to its maximum effect in *The Godfather*, and Michel Chion has described it as “the real watershed for vocal composition” in modern cinema. The 36-year-old Sofia has learned the lesson very well. On this subject, we recall with affection Bill Murray's voice cracking as he sang Roxby Music's “More Than This” in a Tokyo karaoke bar, which seemed to capture so perfectly the washed-up actor Murray was portraying in *Lost in Translation*.

Notes

- 1 Sofia Coppola, *Marie Antoinette* (New York: Rizzoli, 2006).
- 2 Jean-Luc Godard, *The Future(s) of Film: Three Interviews 2000/01*, trans. John O'Toole (Bern: Verlag Gachnang & Springer, 2002), p. 25.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 67.
- 4 The “singular” quality of Marianne Faithfull's voice should not go unnoticed in Coppola's choice to cast the English musician in a role that attaches such importance to her voice-over work. It is often remarked how, as a singer, Faithfull's voice transformed dramatically in her 1979 comeback album, *Broken English*, which was recorded after two years of living on the streets of Soho, a period in her life marked by drug abuse. Listening to the album, it is not hard to sense her experiences of those two years in her huskier and much croaked up voice. This is what we mean by the “singular” quality of Faithfull's voice.
- 5 J. Hoberman, “French Confection”, *The Village Voice*, Oct. 10, 2006. <http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0641,hoberman,74687,20.html>
- 6 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 24.
- 7 Marguerite Duras, quoted in Deleuze, op. cit., p. 251.
- 8 Agnès Poirier, “An Empty Hall of Mirrors”, *The Guardian*, May 26, 2006. http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Guardian/0,,1784264,00.html
- 9 Pascal Bonitzer, “An India and its Other (*India Song*)”, in David Wilson (ed.), *Cahiers du cinéma Volume Four: 1973-1978: History, Ideology, Cultural Struggle* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 10 Chion, op. cit., p. 164.

A Polite Way of Being Desperate

AN INTERVIEW WITH Marjane Satrapi

JON DAVIES

Persepolis is the darkly humorous adaptation of Paris-based Marjane Satrapi's candid graphic novels about her coming of age in Iran and in Austria. Directed by Satrapi and fellow comics artist Vincent Paronnaud, the film is one of the most ambitious and successful attempts at conveying through animation the interplay between past and present, fantasy and reality, and perhaps most of all, the author's inner life and the wider social and political conflicts unfolding around her.

Headstrong, Bruce Lee-loving Marjane (Gabrielle Lopes, Chiara Mastroianni) is a young girl growing up in the Tehran of the late 1970s, where there is a large popular movement to depose the U.K.- and U.S.-backed Shah. Marjane's immediate family is secular, while her beloved Uncle Anoush (François Jerosme) is a fiercely idealistic communist, so they are all horrified when Islamists fill the political vacuum left after the Shah is finally ousted; this betrayal hangs like a pall over the film. With the one-two punch of the Islamic Revolution and the bloody Iran-Iraq War, Satrapi and Paronnaud wryly convey the conformism and hypocrisy of the Islamic authorities. They are eager to sniff out impropriety at every opportunity yet bewildered by globalized American culture: Marjane's Nike sneakers get her in trouble for being "punk," while pop-music cassettes by the likes of Iron Maiden and "Jichael Mackson" are covertly sold on the streets like drugs.

While *Persepolis* is trenchantly critical of all social and political injustice – and perhaps even more so, stupidity, apathy and cruelty—it is always first and foremost about Marjane. She is sent to study at a French lycée in Vienna in 1986, to escape the constant surveillance and repression. There she struggles with trying to fit into a racist and affluent Western culture, and she befriends a posse of bratty self-proclaimed anarchists, as well as taking her first stabs at love. After ending up homeless and alone, she eventually returns home to the Iran of the early 1990s to find a country gutted by war and intensified domestic repression, demoral-

ized beyond measure. (The film's refrain could be "just when you thought it couldn't get any worse....") After a deep depression, she goes to art school, leaves behind a failed marriage and sets out for France on her own. The film is so moving because of Marjane, and the contrast it develops between her rebellious, fanciful and very open mind and the obscene terrors and laws of the world outside is as stark as the rift between her family home—where one is free to shed the constricting veil—and the heavily monitored and guarded city streets.

As a salve, the film mines black comedy from the most tragic situations, particularly as the hard times depicted bring out the worst in people. Early in the film the casual commonplaceness of horror is conveyed as Marjane and the neighborhood kids cavalierly play "torture" and scheme to tear a boy's eyes out for his father's rumored involvement in the Shah's secret police. (This also neatly summarizes how easily hearsay and scapegoating can whip the populace into a bloodthirsty frenzy.) Other scenes—particularly those of young Marjane spending time with her uncle in and out of prison—are almost unspeakably sad. In this case it is because *Persepolis* itself fulfills Uncle Anoush's wishes that his story of the good fight be told because the "family memory must live on." The directors also heavily heartedly capture the bitter ironies of history: how everyone suddenly boasted of being revolutionaries *after* the Shah had fallen; and the struggle to keep one's integrity when forced to lie and cheat just to stay alive. Thankfully, Marjane's grandmother (Danielle Darrieux)—an elegant, staunch woman who perfumes her brassiere with jasmine—acts as Marjane's conscience, and her loving, endlessly empathetic parents (Catherine Deneuve and Simon Abkarian) are hugely supportive as well. The combination of the voice actors with the boldly drawn characters brings these real-world people to life with more poignancy and pathos than live-action cinema ever could.

The directors pull off their story's tonal variations with



aplomb, as real traumas about the most absurd fantasies. These include a sequence highlighting the abundance of European supermarkets that is staged like a Hollywood musical, and a sequence depicting the grotesque mutations her body endured during puberty. Similarly, Marjane's first serious relationship plays out twice: first as lovestruck fantasy, and then as grotesque tragicomedy. This is what animation is capable of.

This status as an animated film is what sets *Persepolis* apart from most memoirs, though it follows on a small but vital tradition of using animation to capture the more personal fallout of real-world war and violence. On the one hand, animation's techniques require some physical and temporal distance from any real historical events that are being depicted. On the other, because animation is an artistic, interpretive vision, it is in some ways more immediate on an emotional level and more capable of expressing subjective responses to the experience of strife totally unrestrained by the laws of time and space. Animation allows one to imagine the impossible, a process for giving form to the desire to change the world. This is dramatized when bright-faced young Marjane introduces herself to us as a future prophet, and reads her grandmother a wish list of regulations to go in effect when she rules the world.

Primarily in black and white, the film's style is bold and graphic, akin to the anti-realistic "limited animation" where forceful, flat forms are all the more expressive for their simplicity. Such horrors as the Shah's forces opening fire on protestors or the thousands of political prisoners executed by the Islamic Republic are powerfully conveyed through stylized silhouettes, humanizing what could have been undifferentiated masses of people into unforgettable tableaux. As Satrapi explains in our interview, animation also allowed her an infinite number of ways of telling the story, a promiscuity of genre and style that would appear too mannered in live action (particularly the visual tropes of the silent era that it employs). *Persepolis* never hides its cartoonishness – in fact, it is quite self-conscious about it – which makes its reckoning with some of the most extreme traumas a person could go through all the more memorable. After all, much Classical-era studio cartooning followed the convention that the character can never die, no matter how many cliffs they fall off or shotgun blasts they take to the face, but the risk of irreversible death is around every corner in *Persepolis*.

The film has generally been rapturously received by all but the Iranian authorities, who have tried to suppress it in various ways. In the popular press, this has unfortunately left the film marked by the over-simplifying and unproductive label "controversial," which obscures the great intelligence and wit of its political satire. It is ultimately a work that could only have been created by a mind that is open and free – from shame, from fear, from not knowing whether to laugh or cry, from preconceptions of how one should think and feel—and perhaps that is what scares despots most of all.

Jon Davies: What or who were some of your influences when you were thinking about making your graphic novels into an animated film?

Marjane Satrapi: German Expressionism was very important for

the black and white and how to treat the shadows, then Italian Neo-realism for the small anecdotes and the family story, and then other movies like *The Night of the Hunter* to make the story more epic. Vincent and I did not precisely think about influences when we were writing the script, but we had a good cinematic culture. Then when you are working with other people, you have to tell them, "you should think of Murnau or Fritz Lang," then you realize what your influences are.

J.D. Everything you mentioned is live-action fiction cinema....

M.S. Absolutely. There are no animation influences, actually. It's not that I don't like animated movies, but we didn't have anything that we could use as a reference. What could we make reference to, Walt Disney? Even though there are many Disneys that I like, or Tex Avery or Miyazaki. The whole difficulty of the project was that when you are working with a team of 90-100 people, what can you tell them? We had to make an animation and we didn't have any references for it, so we had to create our own.

J.D. I take it you don't see the film as a documentary because you're treating it in an "epic" way as you say?

M.S. It's *really* not a documentary about my life, no matter how personal the story is. As soon as you make a script out of it, it becomes fictional, romantic...it has to be sublime actually, that is the artwork. It is certainly not a documentary, far from that. If in real life there are people that have seen God with their own eyes and the ghost of Karl Marx and all of that, then, ok, we can call it a documentary.

J.D. Can you discuss how you used animation to its greatest advantage: its capacity to illustrate these fantastic sequences representing things you never could with live action?

M.S. Absolutely. The first thing is that as soon as you put a story in a geographical place with a certain type of face, a certain kind of person, it really belongs to this part of the world. We didn't want to make a story that would be again about these Middle Easterners that are so crazy, we don't know what they are talking about, they are so far from us that we will never understand them. The drawing is very much abstract so that helps everybody to identify, because Tehran can be Cincinnati, it can be Chicago, it can be any big city. It can be anywhere and it can be anybody. That is the first advantage with animation, then you have all the different ways of narrating the story, for example the puppet scene [where paper "puppets" perform a quick burlesque of how the Shah was put in power], all of that. If your name is Federico Fellini you can do that gracefully, but if your name is not Federico Fellini you might be very vulgar, it's better not to even try. Here the animation helps again: The drawing permits us lots of freedom, it gave us possibilities we wouldn't have with live action.

J.D. It's interesting that the more subjective and imaginative a view you present, somehow it's more universal because of that... What actually inspired you to turn the books into a film?

M.S. I am very much convinced that if you make a book, it is the

worst idea in the world to turn it into a movie; you cannot have a worse idea than that. But suddenly it was a possibility, people came to me and said I could do exactly what I wanted. This is the kind of thing that doesn't happen every day, so we decided let's go for it, knowing all the dangers, knowing you can make a real shit out of it, and at the same time having enough faith to just say, ok, we'll try to do our best.

J.D. It's quite rare that somebody is in a position where they can direct the adaptation of their own book; was that a challenge?

M.S. All my life has been about doing things myself. I didn't know how to make comics, either. I always think that I will take a chance, and in the worst case I will make a disaster, but I am not dead...and in the two years time that I am doing this disaster at least I will learn something. How much can you lose when you are learning something? It has helped me not to know anything, any codes, because then you have to invent your own. Also, I am a hardworking person; it's not just a question of talent. Talent is maybe 20% of it, 80% of the thing is that you have to work like hell.

J.D. The film is quite darkly funny; do you see your ability to make fun of the regime as a kind of survival strategy?

M.S. I don't think I'm making fun so much of the regime; the first person that I'm making fun of is myself. Just taking out the subversive part, humor is the most important and the most efficient way of communicating: if you can make people laugh then everything is fine. Humor is also understanding the spirit of the other one, it's not like crying. You cry because you're sick or your father is dead; all people around the world cry for the same reasons, but we don't laugh for the same reasons, and laughing with somebody is really, really understanding the other one's conceptual part of the brain. And you can very easily be sad with yourself but to be able to laugh you have to laugh with other people, it is about communication between two human beings. Of course, there are so many bad things happening in the world, having humor for me is in a way a polite way of being desperate. If you are desperate and you are all the time vomiting your despair on people's heads, this is very far from being polite. Considering that everybody has their own pain in their life, I don't want to add another layer to that, it's not about who suffered more. Suffering is the same thing anywhere, if they cut off a piece of your finger or your arm, it's not because the surface is smaller that it aches less, it aches the same.

J.D. It seems like a lot of the most lasting humor—or even the most lasting art in general – comes out of despair.

M.S. Absolutely, that's what art is good for.

J.D. Can you talk about the balance you strike between your inner life—you as an individual—and the world around you?

M.S. That's exactly why I put it in my point of view, and I think that's why people relate to it. It's much easier to relate to one person than to a whole nation or to a group of people, because a group of people is abstract. I believe there is nothing more

universal than one person, and I also believe that individualism is the basis of democracy, that each person has the right to think the way they want and feel the way they want. It's not a movie about the history of Iran, of course history is in the background, politics is in the background, but how can it be otherwise?

J.D. So taking all that into account, how do you feel when something happens like the film being pulled by the Bangkok International Film Festival and the Iranian government interfering, all of a sudden making the film "controversial." What position does that put you in?

M.S. The Bangkok Film Festival, apparently from what I know, they asked [the Iranians], is this movie going to be a problem for you? And what do they want them to say? Of course they will say this is a problem for us. You know, these are the things that happen—Thailand is not a democracy either. What can I say? I have made this work. They say this gives Iran a bad image, blah blah blah, I think the people that say this kind of stuff have not watched the movie in reality, because it is an attempt that the people of the world will make peace with the Iranians and see the Iranians the way they are, not the way they see on the TV: crazy fanatics with the only goal in their life is to go and destroy the West. What do they want me to say? I don't have anything to say to them, I know what I have done.

J.D. Is it strange being forced to relive your childhood and adolescence in a way while making the film and touring it around, because it's been over ten years since you were there?

M.S. Yes, that's true, I always say that the truth is never far. But you should never forget that it is also a story. You know the sequence, just to give you an example, with me and my grandmother going to watch *Godzilla*. My grandmother used to speak a lot in the cinema, this is the truth, but I never went to watch a *Godzilla* movie with her, but because of the war and all this fire that comes out of this animal, it was more appropriate to put that instead of another movie. It is very funny really, the moment the script was written, I really felt like this was just fictional, so I started talking about her, Marjane, as if she were someone else, so it's a very schizophrenic feeling to make a movie like that. But at the same time, you know, I'm not a neurotic artist, it doesn't cause any problems to me. This is the difference between having neuroses and being pragmatic."

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This interview was originally conducted in August 2007 for the Toronto International Film Festival's *Festival Daily* newspaper.

The Brave One

'There's Plenty of Ways to Die'

CAROLE ZUCKER

"...precisely because the universe in which we live is somehow a universe of dead conventions and artificiality, the only authentic real experience must be some extremely violent, shattering experience. And this we experience as a sense that now we are back in real life."

—Slavoj Žižek

Neil Jordan's journey is an unusual one marked by anomalies and seemingly radical shifts in direction. The Irish filmmaker has oscillated between mainstream, studio films and films cobbled together with independent funding. Although Jordan had a brush with studio filmmaking in 1988 when he directed *High Spirits* and again in his following film, *We're No Angels*, neither experience was a particularly happy one (*High Spirits* was removed from his control and recut and partly reshot by the studio), and he returned to small budget filmmaking in Ireland with *The Miracle* in 1991. After the success of *The Crying Game* in 1992, Jordan was chosen by his "angel" David Geffen for the coveted task of directing *Interview With the Vampire* in 1994. Thereafter, Jordan worked for Warner Bros. (*Michael Collins* and *The Butcher Boy*), DreamWorks (*In Dreams*), and Columbia (*The End of the Affair*) before reverting, with *The Good Thief* in 2002, to a more independent, Euro-pudding method of financing, which was the case with his next venture, *Breakfast on Pluto*. Jordan returned to Warner Bros to make his most recent feature, *The Brave One*.

Jordan has managed, throughout nearly all of his career, to remain independent in spite of his studio connections. He has mainly written his own scripts even in cases where he has generously shared co-writing credit with another author. For example, in the film *In Dreams*, Bruce Robinson is given credit as Jordan's writing partner. Yet, it is clear from a perusal of Robinson's version of the script, that Jordan used virtually none of Robinson's work. The term "art cinema" is one that applies to each of Jordan's films whether studio driven or independent; it is his imaginative vision that motors his filmmaking whether working on small or large budget projects. The Irish filmmaker has been strongly influenced by European art cinema, particularly the works of Godard, Resnais, Fellini, Antonioni and Wenders, amongst others. Apart from his unique thematic and stylistic signatures, he often employs the sort of authorial intervention that I claim for *The Brave One*, a studio-bred film. The particular stylistic tropes articulated by this intervention are insistent and serve to push the film firmly in the direction of "art cinema." It would be difficult to contemplate a Jordan film that was bereft of the touches that mark his poetic disposition.

The opening paragraph of Neil Jordan's novel *Shade* begins:

"I know exactly when I died. It was twenty past three on the fourteenth of January of the year nineteen fifty, an afternoon of bright unseasonable sunlight with a whipping wind that scurried the white clouds through the blue sky above me and gave the Irish sea beyond more than its normal share of white horses." (Jordan 2004: 3)



The Brave One

Shade is narrated in part by a dead woman, Nina Hardy, interspersed with the narrative voice of the omniscient author. It is a ghostly presence that seems to haunt *The Brave One* as well.

The Brave One revolves around the life of a New York radio talkshow host, a storyteller, Erica (Jodie Foster), whose radio tag on her show 'I Walk the City' is 'The Streetwalker'. The programme is comprised of her romanticised and sweetly sentimental commentary on her beloved New York, 'the safest big city in the world'. Throughout the credit sequence Erica's voice is overdubbed from her different sessions in the recording studio, fragmenting her vocals. The art of telling stories is a vehicle for the communication and sharing of human knowledge, understanding and feeling that is vital to Jordan's filmmaking process.

We first meet Erica as she and David (Naveen Andrews) discuss their upcoming marriage and the colour of the wedding invitations. Their talk is punctuated with their movements as they dance lovingly around one another, holding, hugging and kissing. The formalities concerning the wedding are prompted by David's mother, because, as Erica says, 'You have a family, David. I don't.' This fact becomes relevant once Erica loses David and lives in isolation from any community.

They stop as they walk their dog, Curtis, in Central Park and Erica claims that she wants 'the whole deal' as well, because 'it's not as if I'm going to do it twice.' David counters with: 'That's the nicest thing you ever said to me.' After they kiss they suddenly realise that it has got dark and Curtis is gone. Both of them call for the dog, but he fails to come. They leave the path reminding one of the fairy tale interdiction 'Don't stray from the path' and enter one of the dark, gothic labyrinthine tunnels that run through the park. We see the image of David and Erica on the shaky screen of a mobile phone. A man, Reed (Rafael Sardina), is seen holding Curtis by his leash. Reed starts to goad the couple: 'Hey, come on, don't you know there's a fuckin' leash law?' David tries to calm things down by being polite, but this has no effect. We realize there are three men, including Reed (Blaze Foster) and Lee (Luis da Silva Jr.), who close in on David and Erica and beat them savagely with fists, bottles and metal pipes. We see the incident in a monochromatic image as it is recorded on the mobile phone. The thug holding the phone calls out at one point, as he smashes Erica against the tunnel wall: 'Hollywood time! HOLLYWOOD!' The images recorded on the mobile will be revisited at various junctures of the film as Erica remembers the attack. The scene of the assault is edited in a highly fragmented way, the rhythm is staccato, revealing only portions of the action and parts of bodies intercut with shots on the mobile. This sense of mediation is important to the film; it gives the film a quality of being overlooked, as if an invisible watcher is recording the events. It is an authorial intrusion of the type that we normally associate with art cinema (Bordwell: 211).

After the attack, we see Erica and David as they are wheeled on gurneys within the trauma centre of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. Nurses and doctors insert intravenous drip tubes and shunts (to drain the liquid) into their battered, blood-soaked bodies. Their clothing is cut away so that the hospital staff can attend to their wounds. Interwoven with the actions of the hos-

pital staff are abstracted shots of Erica and David's body parts as they make love.

We move away from the David and Erica story when Detective Mercer (Terrence Howard, in a complex and sensitive portrayal of a "good cop") views a dead female in the same hospital with a bullet wound on her temple. The dead woman's partner, Murrow (Gordon MacDonald), claims that she has committed suicide, and even though her fingerprints are all over the weapon, it is taken for granted that her husband is the perpetrator. Detective Mercer later says, 'Women never shoot themselves in the face. Not in my experience.'

Mercer looks in on the comatose Erica; plastic tubing runs from her fractured, fragile body to machines. As the script says, 'It's ugly, survival. Without passion—an odd way to hold on to a life.' (Shooting script of *The Brave One*: 14)

Erica awakens three weeks later from a coma to learn that David did not survive the brutal attack. After her stay in the hospital, she returns to her flat. The time frame is not clear, but one imagines that her physical recovery was protracted because of the massive damage perpetrated upon her. The sense of loss that percolates amongst the characters in Jordan's films dominates Erica's homecoming. Sarah McLachlan's honeyed voice sings "Answer" on the soundtrack. Images of the fatal assault are again intertwined with shots of David and Erica making love, their bodies fragmented, reminding one of the lovemaking sequences in Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959). The lovemaking in *The Brave One* and in the Resnais film emphasize the abstraction of body parts, and the beauty of the act of love is suffused with a sense of melancholy and imminent loss. This abstraction of the body is similar to the way coitus is depicted in *The End of the Affair*, the only other Jordan film in which copulation is shown on screen.

Erica's loneliness is palpable as she slowly adjusts to solitude and life without her partner. When she tremulously leaves her flat for the first time she is lit from behind, and framed with a canted angle that underscores the vertigo and edginess of her fearful emergence back into her own life and the life of the city. There is a feeling that Erica and David shared "*Das Reich der Zwei*," a kingdom of two, the term Kurt Vonnegut uses to describe the all-consuming, exclusive love of the main character in *Mother Night*, writing about his love for his wife (Vonnegut 1961: 37). David and Erica appear to have a very small social network. Only Erica's friend, Nicole (Jane Adams), an art gallery owner, leaves a message on her answering machine during the time Erica remains housebound.

The first thing Erica does once she leaves her domestic space is to enter a gun shop in a shot ominously bisected by a security camera image in the foreground. The owner refuses to sell her a gun without the mandatory waiting period of thirty days. Her desperation is evident as she begs for the gun, but the shopkeeper owner is unimpressed. As she exits the store she is stopped by a gun dealer. He offers her a pistol—a Kahr K9, a popular choice for concealment and self-defence. The vendor offers her lessons on loading and using the gun and throws in the bullets for free.

We next find Erica ambling around the aisles of a conven-

ience store. Suddenly, the Asian woman who owns the store is confronted by her raging spouse who says, "So you won't let me see my kids?" A domestic dispute flares up; the man shoots his wife again and again and again as blood showers the photos of their children on the wall. Erica is hunched down in an aisle to avoid being seen, but she sees the action on ceiling-mounted surveillance mirrors. The man opens the cash register as Erica's mobile phone rings. Before she can turn it off the gunman hears it and starts walking rapidly towards her. Heavy breathing is heard on the soundtrack. There is a burst of fire from Erica's gun as she shoots wildly at the assailant through glass bottles on a shelf; the scene is filmed in slow motion. She looks at the shooter's body and sees arterial blood spurting out of his neck; he is dying. With the finesse of a schooled criminal, Erica has the savvy to eject the videotape from the store's monitoring device to preclude identification. The scene takes place in Spanish Harlem, and there is always a sense in the film that danger is imminent as Erica seeks out places where a woman would simply not go to alone, after dark. She lives in interstitial spaces, a twilight zone. Like the wolf/man in *The Company of Wolves* she goes between the world above and below. As the wolf/man says, 'I come and go between both.' And certainly Erica strays far, far from the path.

The Brave One grants the teller of the tale a wide berth for the creative deployment of fairy tales. The director chooses to focus on the more troubled constituents of this particular narrative form. Erica's lack of affect is contrasted with her outbursts of violence and accommodates Jordan's penchant for probing the effects of trauma on identity, most commonly endowed with a basic sense of loss. Jordan's fairy tale-like narratives often mine the territory of traumatic social events as found in all of his films from *Angel* onward. There is a feeling that his characters are often unable to return to normality in order to heal the source of their wounds. Jordan's storytelling arises from popular culture, and the vigilante film, like the horror film, expresses the social anxieties of the times. The film can be seen as a contemporaneous articulation of the fairy tale—but one which is registered in the key of apocalypticism.

The scenes of violence also demonstrate Jordan's predilection for the dark carnival which Bakhtin writes about. It destabilises social norms, "...opening the way for licentious misrule, generating what might be called festive horror, a genre in which carnival's material bodily principle ... its base of promiscuous carnality, blasphemy, scatology and ritual degradation is translated from a comic social discourse into a pathological one" (in Morgan 2002: 135).

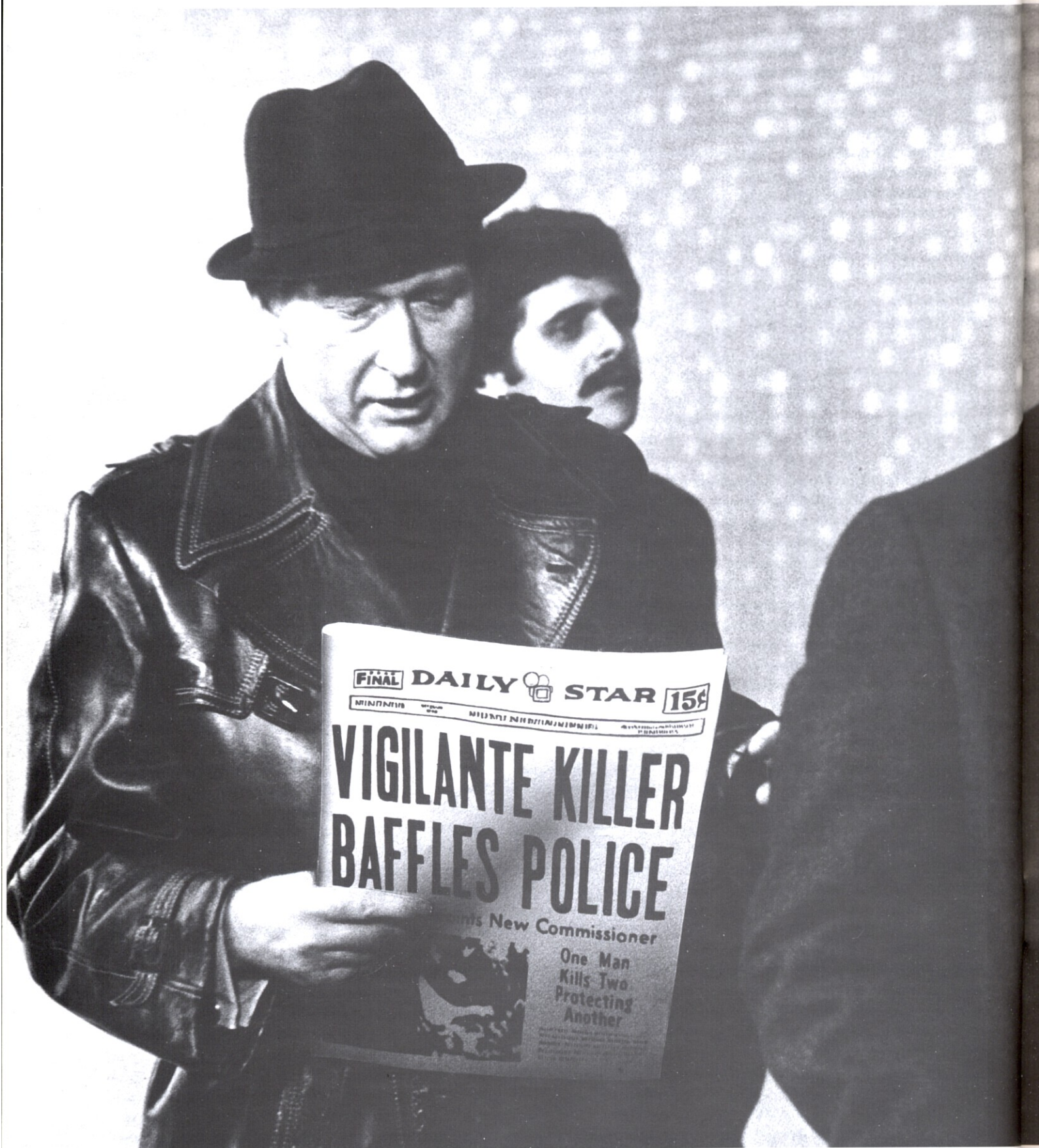
Misrule becomes, in *The Brave One*, millennial thought, so prevalent in the post 9/11 world. The agents and events in the 'Book of Revelation', the notion of the 'last days' have always had a strong pull on Western intellect and imagination. One of the most important components and influences of eschatological thinking is polarity—the Manichean forces of light and dark with no middleground. Creative energies are generated by the tension between Good and Evil. Millennialism is generally preoccupied with violence as something that will destroy historical evil. It is swift and absolute like Erica's transgressive vengeance-

fueled actions. The End in the Beginning, as M.H. Abrams writes in *The Correspondent Breeze*, creates a circular movement starting with unitary felicity as in David and Erica's relationship; then self-division which marks Erica after the murderous attack; sin, established in Erica's nocturnal murders; exile, wherein Erica experiences dissociation and talks to Mercer about becoming a 'stranger' to herself and the world around her. Suffering is the next stage and is found in Erica's living hell in a post-David world. Finally there is a return in the cycle to initial happiness. (Abrams 1984: 225-257.) The latter is left completely ambiguous in *The Brave One*, although it is admittedly difficult to contemplate Erica living a congenial existence after all that she has done and all that has been inflicted upon her. The dark Romanticism at the heart of *The Brave One* is another manifestation of the director's links to that particular cultural and historical movement in which the visionary poets Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey in England, and Hölderlin in Germany embraced the French Revolution as a crisis that inspired new hope, but also darkened the imagination. It is not too great a leap to nominate Erica as a terrorist. It is her personal *jihad*, when she decides to dispatch her 'evil' victims.

New York as a cityscape plays a large role in the film—the city is filmed almost always at night. There is an atmosphere that is strongly reminiscent of the way in which London is filmed in *Mona Lisa*, a version in both theme and style of Dante's *Inferno* (Jordan Commentary on *Mona Lisa* DVD). One would correctly consider *The Brave One* to be the progeny of the vigilante film, e.g. Michael Winner's *Death Wish* (1974). Yet there is an oneiric quality to the photography in which the background of the shots is often out of focus and blurred, brightly coloured neon lights flicker, and rotating patrol car lights figure prominently in many of the compositions. This sort of stylisation aligns itself more with the surreal than with the sort of more realistic approach to the drama of *Death Wish*. Jordan's film is, like *Mona Lisa*, a rendering of a nightmarish, mythopoeic imagination of a city.

The presence of the camera insinuates itself into the space between the spectator and the actor; the cinematography is by Jordan's longtime collaborator Phillipe Rousselot. The act of filming (and authorial intervention, as mentioned earlier) is emphasised to a greater extent than in any other work the director has made thus far. Shots are taken from behind curtains; through the wires of a construction site; through windows, guard rails on a highway, bookshelves; refracted through glass and mirrors; and perhaps most evocatively (if less than subtly) from behind tombstones in a graveyard. These shots are often lit from the rear and at times overexposed, lending a spectral quality to the image. One of the mostly heavily mediated sequences is the violent beating in Central Park of Erica and David. The blurred chromatic mobile phone image is intercut with the 35mm images, and is repeated at various points in the film as flashbacks.

Erica returns to her job against the express wishes of her boss, Carol, in an underwritten role played by Mary Steenburgen. Erica begins her show, but has trouble speaking. While Erica starts to record, she is photographed from behind bookshelves, which gives one the sense of surveillance by an

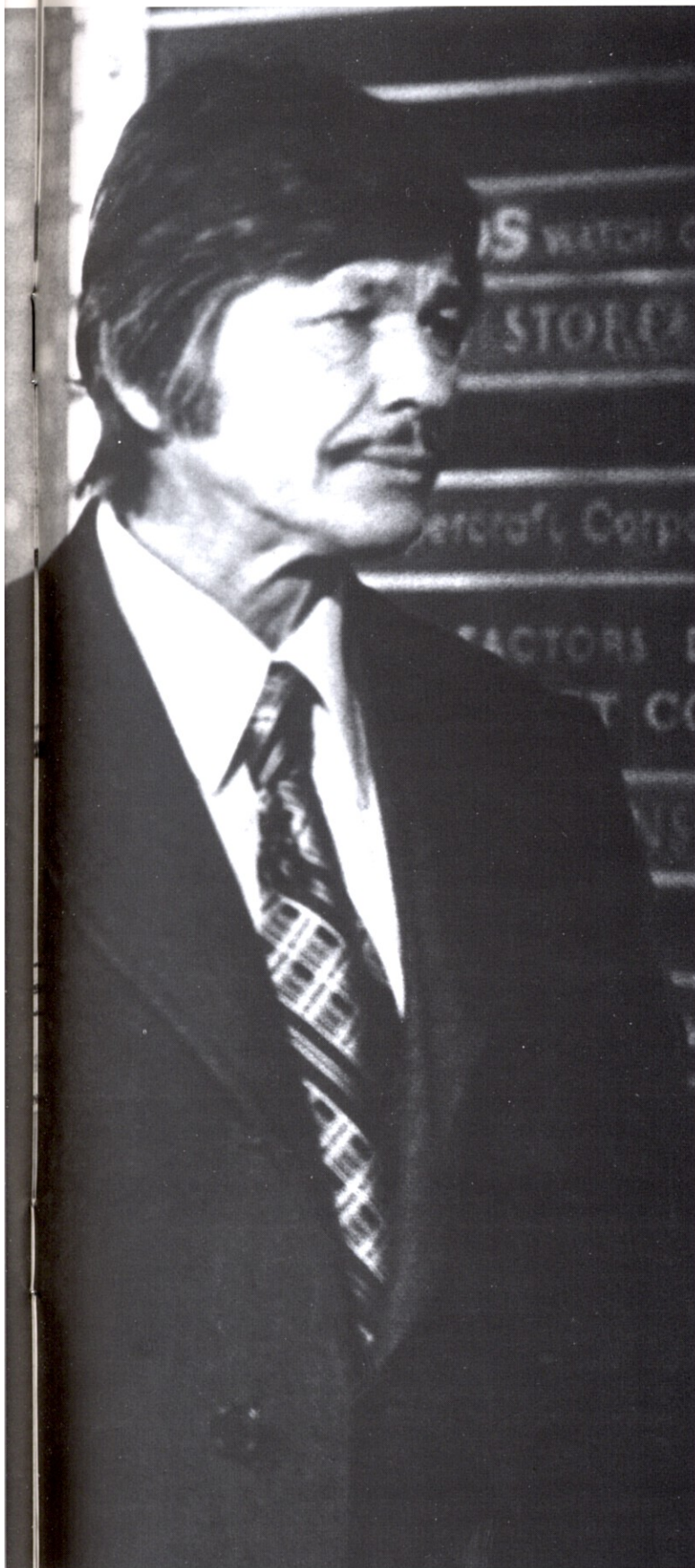


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Death Wish

unknown force and introduces the motif of the fragmented self which ripens as the film evolves. She says: 'This is Erica Bain and I walk the city. New York, like any metropolis is an organism that mutates...' Erica stops speaking; there is nothing but dead air. She starts again but only manages the first few words. Carol frantically asks if there is something else to cut to, and the engineer is about to pull the plug on the program, when Erica leans in toward the microphone and repeats her opening lines with great intensity, then, shot in big closeups. Erica speaks:

"New York, the safest big city in the world. But it is horrible to fear the place you once loved. And to see a street corner you knew so well and be afraid of its shadow. To see familiar steps and be unable to climb them. I never understood how people lived with fear. Women afraid to walk home alone. People afraid of white powder in their mailbox. Darkness. People afraid of other people. I always believed that fear belonged to other people. Weaker people. It never touched me. And then it did. And when it touches you, you know... that it's been there all along. Waiting beneath the surfaces of everything you loved. and your skin crawls, and your heart sickens, you look at the person that was once you, walking down the street ... and wonder will you ever be her again?"

Her speech is intercut by shots of Detective Mercer listening in his car. This major transmutation in Erica's identity is a trope articulated throughout Jordan's work, starting with *Angel*, and is most strongly foregrounded in works such as *The Crying Game*, *In Dreams* and *Breakfast on Pluto*.

Another violent situation occurs where passengers are being harassed in a subway car. Erica sits off to one side in a nearly empty car. At the other end two toughs are bullying the passengers. When the subway car enters a station, everyone makes a quick exit, but Erica remains seated—collected and stonefaced. Erica at this point in the narrative has developed a carapace of hardness, just barely covering her still-raw wounds. As one character later says to the police, attempting to describe her: 'She was on lockdown. Kind of scary'. Erica is now a sort of zombie, a living dead person who feeds off those who are still alive. It is a survival mode that allows her to bear her personal apocalypse.

The two toughs cannot believe that Erica has stayed in the subway car. They look at her and say, "The bitch is crazy." One of the thugs approaches her, wielding a bladed instrument. He closes in on her, and runs the blade beneath Erica's chin, into the concavity of her neck and down to her chest, and says: 'Have you ever gotten fucked by a knife?' His body is suddenly hurled backwards by the force of the shot Erica has fired; blood splatters as the other thug moves towards Erica and she fires again. Erica's breathing is shallow and heavy as she exits the scene.

There are a number of shots that atomise Erica's face with

swirling camera movements as she departs the scene of the crime. She goes to a club and vomits in the bathroom sink, then refreshes herself. Erica, perversely, returns to the area where we find Detective Mercer and his partner Vitale (Nicky Katt) are investigating the crime. Mercer posits a theory: "Maybe some average Joe decided he's not going to take it anymore, and I'm going to get me a gun and take matters into his own hand. Kind of guy you wouldn't ever notice."

The following morning the headlines 'VIGILANTE' are splashed across newspapers. The idea of the vigilante can be intertwined with Renée Girard's concept of "sacrificial substitution." Implicit in this line of reasoning is the notion that all parties agree to a certain level of misunderstanding—a level of denial. Erica's shootings easily fall into the pattern of "sacrificial substitution." She is asked by her boss to open her talkshow to invite public commentary on the vigilante's activities. The comments run like this: "As far as I'm concerned he's doing us a favour," to another caller who says "there's not a person I know who doesn't get some jolt of pleasure when they hear about a vigilante," and "... revenge makes us feel good." There is a complicit sense that these human sacrifices are not murders, as well as a transgression of civil liberties, and the acceptance of this fact creates a consensus within the community. One victim, Jodie's fiancé, David, is being displaced by another, but there is a tacit understanding that no one will mention this. Girard is also trying to remove the theological rationale for sacrifice, and to look at it as a social act; he wants to eliminate the "Godtoldmeto" aspect that is common to traditional sociological theory. Girard feels that we must recognise that religion has very little relevance in the modern world, and to say that sacrifice is an act of mediation between the sacrificer and a deity is merely an imaginary explanation. Girard says violence moves from one victim to another so easily that the actual horror and senselessness of violence are hidden (Girard: 1–38).

The relationship between Mercer and Erica develops after the second shooting. It is one of Jordan's great themes—erotic tension conflated with impossible love. Whatever Mercer's attraction for Erica is, he cannot, once he comes to understand that she is the vigilante, think about having a relationship with her. His moral principles—which he will eventually abandon in order to help Erica in her quest for vengeance—bind him to track down the vigilante, as expressed in this dialogue:

MERCER

You know Erica, when I was a rookie, I used to give myself this test. If someone I knew had committed a crime, would I have the fortitude to put them away.

ERICA

What kind of someone?

MERCER

Someone close to me. Like the best friend I could ever hope to have had.

ERICA

And?

MERCER

I always hoped I would have had the courage, the dedication to say yes.

ERICA

And... do you?

MERCER

I do. And it's important that you know that.

ERICA

I know that. It's what I admire about you.

Mercer is implicitly warning Erica that he will arrest whoever the vigilante is once the person is found. At this point he has very definite suspicions about Erica's involvement, and in a manner that is both gentle and diplomatic, he is reminding her that whatever his feelings for her are, he must honour his duty to uphold the law.

The relationship between Erica and Mercer develops, and parallel editing is used to depict their congruity. Scenes of Erica in her apartment are intercut with Mercer in his. Both are insomniacs and they develop a pattern of late-night phone calls to reach out to each other in the night. Shots of Erica and Mercer together are often filmed so that each character shares the frame symmetrically, as in their long dialogue scene in the diner which is partially filmed from outside the window. A subtle halo is formed around the characters by the green neon lighting in the diner.

Erica's unleashed violence begins to be more of a quest to rid the city of pestilential individuals. One begins to understand that *Taxi Driver* (1976) is a kind of *Übertext* for *The Brave One*. (It is of course, ironic, intentionally or not, that Jodie Foster played a lost waif to Harvey Keitel's pimp in the Scorsese film.) As Erica walks in the dark, the driver of a parked car, Cutler (Victor Colicchio), says: 'What will fifty dollars do for you?' Erica replies: 'I don't know.' There is a young girl in a stupor hunched over in the back seat. The car attains the status of a twenty-first century Gothic claustral space, replete with hamburger boxes and candy bar wrappings. Erica says, 'You're looking for a party in the back seat?' Cutler responds, 'Oh yeah.' The girl, Chloe (Zöe Kravitz), bears bruises and cigarette burns on her arms. Erica speaks gently to the girl, and after Cutler finishes a drug-stimulated harangue, Erica says to Chloe: 'You know what? Chloe and I are going to take a little walk.' Cutler replies heatedly, 'You ain't going nowhere.' Erica asks Chloe: 'You want to get out don't you?' The girl replies in the affirmative. Cutler turns swiftly and burns Chloe with his cigarette. Erica places her gun at Cutler's temple and warns him that if he doesn't let Chloe out of the car, 'I'll be the last supercunt you ever see.' Cutler lets Chloe and Erica out of the car, but in a flash, the car hurtles towards the two women. Erica stands tall as the car heads straight towards her. She pumps three bullets into the windscreen which becomes spattered with blood.

Of all the characters in Jordan's repertoire, Erica most resembles two: Claire from *In Dreams* and Danny in *Angel*. The narrative patterning of *The Brave One* indisputably reflects its mythic origin, and certainly Erica is a mythological heroine of a sort. She is bound and determined to endure the horror of her emotional voyage of discovery, her precarious quest that calls up the most monstrous side of her being. She, like Claire, pushes the notion of the transgressive, embracing the connection between her impassioned rage, which, when taken to the extreme, becomes a kind of madness. The voyages taken by Claire and Erica lead them to a place of appalling depravity. Erica, in great pain, grows from a fearful, vulnerable woman to a particularly hideous self, as she becomes more and more capable of incorporating her shadow side, as Jung would say. In the end she attains a degree of unity, as Claire does, that can enable her to come to terms with the beast within. Erica follows the standard pattern of the hero's quest. But whether she experiences a symbolic rebirth—and as what sort of entity—remains in question. Consider the following conversation Erica has with Mercer:

MERCER

Let me ask you a question—how do you pull it back together, after what happened to you?

ERICA

You don't.

MERCER

I'm sorry. That was...

ERICA

No. It's a fair question. You... become someone else.

MERCER

Who?

ERICA

A stranger.

In this she resembles the character of Danny in *Angel*. As in all of Jordan's work, moral, ethical and even physical boundaries are crossed and become indistinct. Like Danny, Erica loses her connection to the external world; she becomes a self-appointed executioner. She is avenging the death of her lover, as Danny is seeking revenge for the death of the deaf-mute girl, but their original motivation seems to dissipate amidst the truly fearsome things they do in the course of their journeys. Both characters by the end have lost a great deal of their humanity. Once Erica starts to stalk her prey she becomes, like Danny, as frightening as those she eliminates. On her quest she pursues one of the city's most vicious and notorious felons. He is Murrow, the man who, in the early hospital scene, claims that his wife has committed suicide, a story no one seems to believe. He is a character well-known to the police; Mercer describes him: "He imports drugs, guns, people, whatever's in demand. Found three guys that had crossed him, hands super-glued to a table, and expanding cement in their

throats. I had his wife ready to testify against him when she is found with her brains blown out. Gun in her hand. Nothing adds up, except his lawyers. Now he's got custody of his stepdaughter and not for sentimental reasons. He knows she knows something and I hate to think of what he'll do to her."

Erica tracks Murrow down and confronts him with his crimes. Erica suddenly grabs his tie and slams her forehead into the bridge of his nose. He staggers back, dropping the crowbar, his nose exploding with blood. A vicious battle ensues and Erica kills Murrow by smashing his head with a crowbar.

The physicality of Erica's violence against Murrow is more viscerally direct and less mediated. He has done nothing to Erica, nor has Cutler, her prior victim. She has taken it upon herself to rid the city of evil, crossing a line from which she can never turn back. As Detective Bloom says to Danny in *Angel* about evil: 'It's deep. It's everywhere and nowhere.' Jordan is only superficially concerned with escalation of violence in New York, or the use of personal weapons; he is more interested in the way violence corrupts the human soul. Yeats had his belief in apocalyptic terror and the mythos of sacrifice, ideas that are continually renewed in Jordan's films.

In some ways, *The Brave One* is Jordan's most tragic film. It is not tragic in the strictly Aristotelian sense but is a modern form of tragedy. It is not about the fall of a great, flawed individual, but about the loss of human feeling. Once Erica completes her ritual and kills the three thugs who murdered David and maimed her body and soul, there is a no real sense of completion. Mercer will cover up Erica's murders; he reverses his earlier conviction that he would be able to arrest a criminal regardless of his or her personal relationship. But Mercer cannot remove her from her status as one of the damned. At the end of *Angel*, a film which bookends so well with *The Brave One*, one feels that after Danny visits the faith healer, there is hope for his spiritual recovery. One feels no such hope at the end of *The Brave One*, perhaps Jordan's grimmest work. The last we see of Erica is a shot of her traversing the Central Park tunnels at night. In voice-over she says, 'This thing. This stranger. She is all you are now'. The shot grows dimmer until we are left with a black frame, as Erica is swallowed up in darkness. The end credits roll.

At the end of *Shade*, when a funeral service is held for the departed main protagonist, Nina, a hymn is sung by those in attendance:

There is a balm in Gilead

To make the wounded whole. (Jordan 2004: 272)

One hopes that Erica's inner wounds will heal. But Jordan offers no resolution, release or redemption from the damage Erica has done to her soul. Yeats would say that it is only through terror that beauty is born and reborn. We are left without a response from Jordan.

Carole Zucker has just published *The Cinema of Neil Jordan: Dark Carnival* with a foreword by Stephen Rea. She is now working on a book of interviews with Irish actors. Dr. Zucker is a Professor of Film Studies at Concordia University in Montreal.

Movements and Rhythms

On Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man 3*

KOHEI USUDA

Whereas the identity of Spider-Man was still a secret and Peter Parker's unrequited love for Mary Jane was the central theme in *Spider-Man 2* (2004)—a love where the other is unaware she is being loved—this theme of secrecy is unceremoniously discarded in its sequel, *Spider-Man 3* (2007). The theme of secrecy is from here on irrelevant since, in the latter film, Mary Jane as well as all his three nemeses (New Goblin, Sandman, Venom, respectively) have acquired the full knowledge concerning the identity previously hidden under Spider-Man's mask. What is more, identity becomes even interchangeable with the appearance of an evil black substance from outer space, which initially takes possession of Peter Parker and later of his rival, photojournalist Eddie.

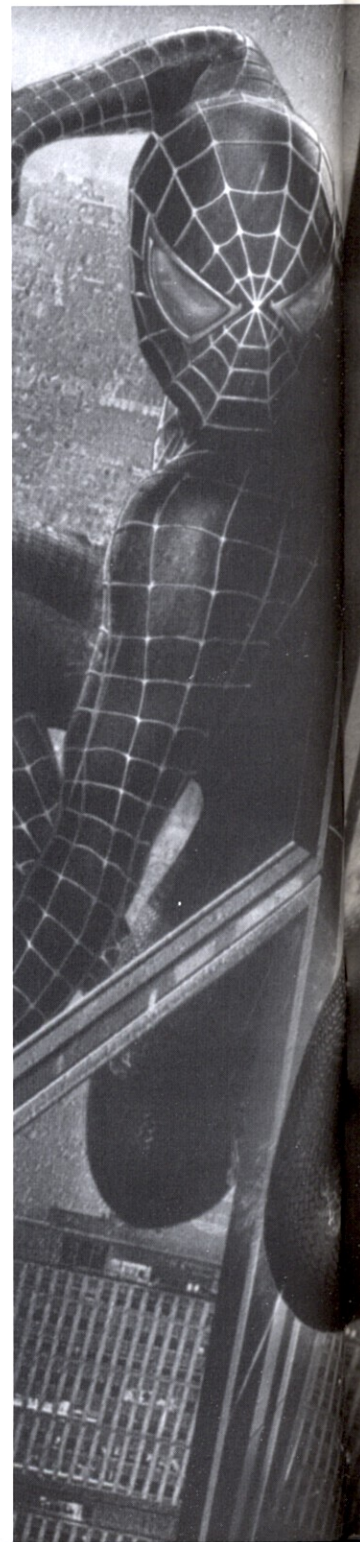
What we can observe in this thematic shift is precisely this: while superhero movies usually played out the issue of identity to its maximum effect—which is a matter of the hero's alter-ego—the director of *The Gift* (2000) makes it clear from the outset that he is no longer interested in Peter Parker's secret identity as New York City's favourite saviour. Rather, now that what had remained a secret is out in the open, this time Sam Raimi places more weight and emphasis on Spider-Man's "gift" as a superhero.

What matters here could be directly traced back to *The Gift*, a film the American director made just prior to embarking on the *Spider-Man* series. Indeed, we believe that in the cinema of Sam Raimi, there is always a connection to be made regardless of the films' genre: whether telling a story about a Marvel comic hero (the *Spider-Man* series) or a Southern gothic tale about a single mother (*The Gift*), in both cases Raimi is concerned with the unique supernatural "gifts" with which his characters are bestowed.

Now, in the case of *The Gift*, we have seen that Cate Blanchett's psychic power was carefully represented rather straightforwardly, by virtue of visualizing the ghosts and the past events, that this Southern woman is able to see in her mind's eyes. On the other hand, we all know, in the case of Spider-Man, what kind of supernatural "gift" Stan Lee's popular comic creation possesses: a young superhero with the power of a spider who is capable single-handedly of fighting monstrous adversaries and who, in the process, saves the lives of a lot of New Yorkers.

Unfortunately, to our knowledge very little has been commented on *how* Sam Raimi represents that "gift", despite the fact that the importance attached to this question becomes increasingly significant in *Spider-Man 3*, not least because Raimi does away with the theme of identity altogether, whereby emphasizing Spider-Man's supernatural power itself. If so, *Spider-Man 3*'s first action sequence could serve as a good starting point for us to investigate Raimi's representation of Spider-Man's "gift".

There's something conspicuously very *musical* about Raimi's adaptation of Stan Lee's comic books, especially in this third and latest installment. Indeed, when we witness Spider-Man in action for the first time saving Bryce Dallas Howard from falling off a New York skyscraper, we are moved at once by Raimi's filmic sense, for so ably capturing the superhero's *movements and rhythms*. If we are seduced by its first action sequence, perhaps we are captivated by Spider-Man's gravity-defying movements, as he so rhythmically arrives at the scene to rescue Bryce Dallas Howard. Gone is Raimi's heavy reliance on Eisensteinian montage to create tension in action, such as the staging of the otherwise static duels between gunfighters in his 1995 spaghetti western, *The Quick and the Dead*. Indeed, Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man *excels* in the fluency of movements and rhythms, in contrast to his girlfriend Mary Jane who is dropped from her first big Broadway role immediately after the premiere due to a unanimous critical fiasco. Truth be told, if we pay enough attention to



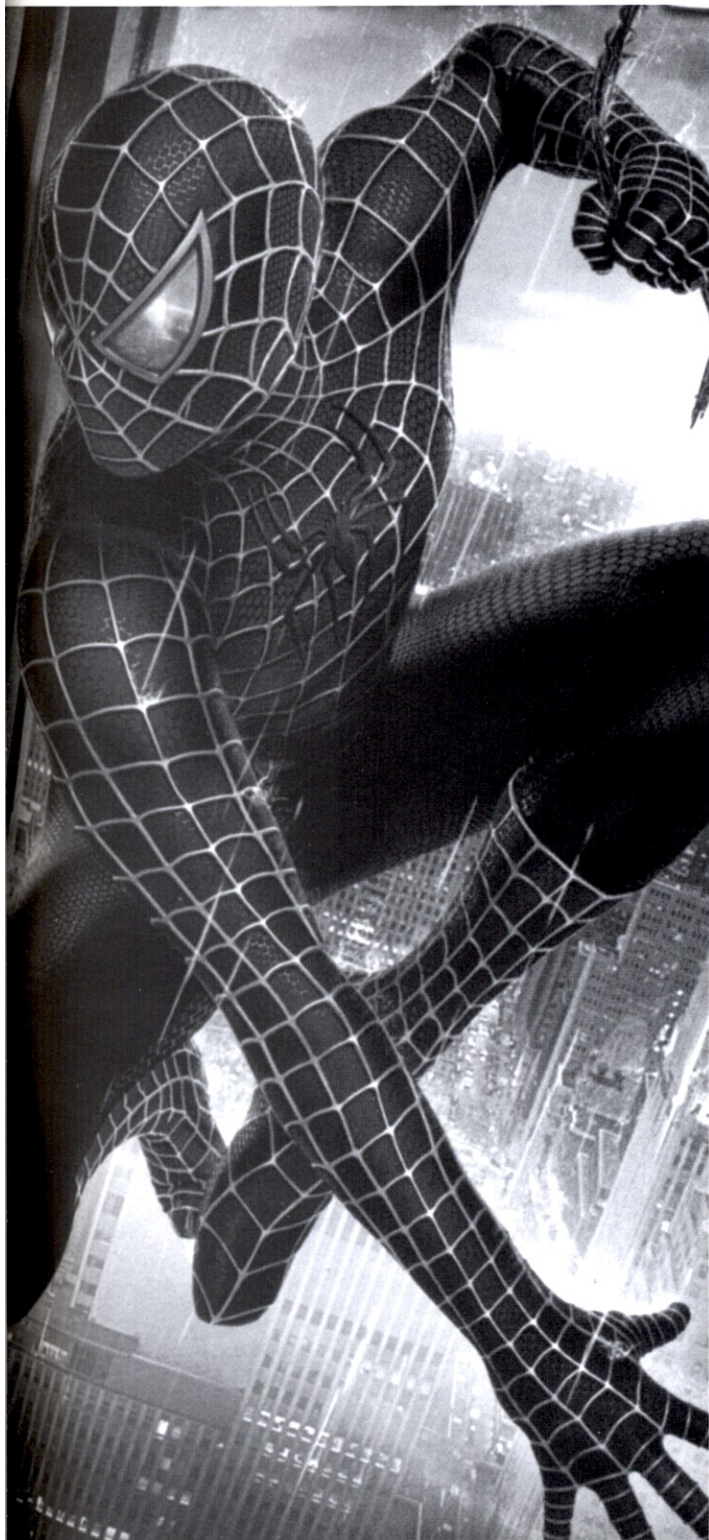
Spider-Man 3's action sequences, we recognize that it is always as battles of movements and rhythms that Raimi so elegantly stages Spider-Man's actions. For instance, Spider-Man's up-and-down movements are always clashing against the rhythms of Sandman's spreadeagled and dispersing movements or New Goblin's rapid horizontal movements as they fight for supremacy in the air.

These momentous explosions of movements and rhythms bring to our mind certain Technicolor MGM musicals, particularly the ones directed by Vincente Minnelli in the '40s and the '50s. We could even argue that, while Minnelli choreographed

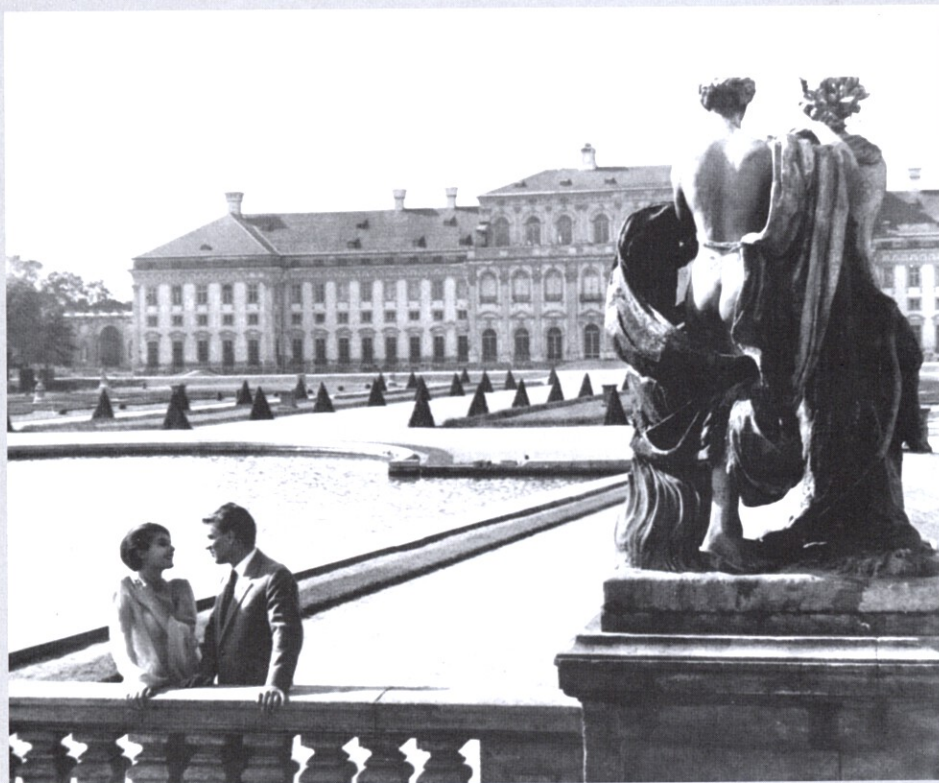
singing and dancing at times aggressively as if they were battles of the sexes amongst lovers—e.g. Fred Astaire vs. Lucille Bremer in *Yolanda and the Thief* (1945), Gene Kelly vs. Leslie Caron in *An American in Paris* (1951)—in the latest film Sam Raimi films his action sequences as though they were musical numbers, as the clashing of two opposing movements and rhythms. In this sense, we could even go so far as to say that, at heart, *Spider-Man 3* is a musical disguised as a superhero movie. And it is not only in its CGI-enhanced fight sequences that such battles are fought out between arch rivals. While in *Spider-Man 2* we were captivated by the freewheeling middle section led by the bubblegum rhythm of BJ Thomas' "Rain Drops Keep Fallin' on My Head"—where Peter Parker momentarily renounces his supernatural power and instead gets on with his life as a normal college science student—in *Spider-Man 3* there are far more extensive and explicit musical signifiers to be found. Those range from Kristin Dunst's rendition of Irving Berlin's "They Say It's Wonderful" during her Broadway performance, and her standard jazz number at the jazz café where she works as a waitress, to James Franco and Dunst's sudden swing dance breakout in the kitchen, not to mention Maguire's sleazy John Travolta imitation as the black substance takes possession of him. What is more, sudden and risky changes become the norm in the film's tone from one scene to another, culminating in the abrupt entry into slapstick comedy à la Monty Python in a French restaurant, as well as frequent and unmotivated changes of heart in the characters' behaviour (Harry Osbourn's loss of memory, MJ breaking up with Peter for no good reason, etc.). Raimi even takes advantage of JK Simmons' rapid manner of delivering his lines in the newsroom sequences (reminiscent of Hawks' *His Girl Friday*) by contrasting it to Maguire's trademark soft-spoken speech-act. It is another form of the clashing of rhythms, this one done phonetically. Moreover, as far as the construction of dramaturgy is concerned, numerous subplots that make up *Spider-Man 3*—entangling like a spider-web—are all too disjointed in the end to be able to add up to any kind of catharsis, despite, for example, the melodramatic death of Harry Osbourn, as though they were all coming from different rhythmic origins.

In conclusion, what can we say about the contribution Raimi's musical approach makes to the superhero movies? At the very least, we can say with certainty that in this steadfastly growing group of films—the revival was kicked off in 1989 by Tim Burton's *Batman*—seldom has the "gift" of the superhero been illustrated in such filmic terms of movements and rhythms as demonstrated here by Sam Raimi.

Arguably, P.T. Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) is the only exception in the contemporary American cinema to employ a musical approach to the male hero, aside from Raimi's contribution. Made in the melancholic flavour of a Jacques Demy musical, Adam Sandler's otherwise hapless hero proceeds in one scene unexpectedly to beat up a group of hoodlums in a dance-like number in one explosive sweeping movement, in order to save his love interest, Emily Watson, from danger. In Anderson's fine film, we recall that Sandler was dressed at all times in light blue suits the colour of sky, thus making a reference to the blue leotard proudly worn by another superhero to grace the screen: Superman.



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